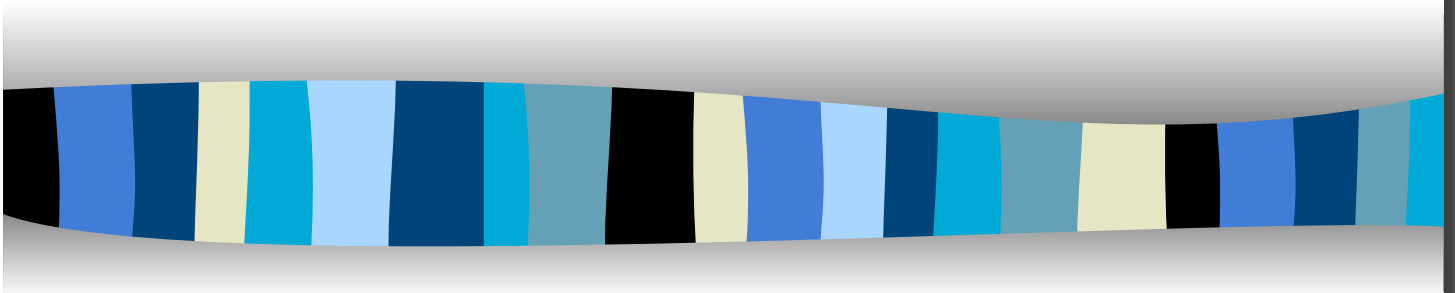


Perceptions and Process: Early Findings from a Study of School District Consolidation in Maine



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Report to the Penquis Superintendents' Association

May 15, 2008

This research was funded by the Penquis Superintendents' Association. The conclusions made in this paper reflect the authors' views and are not attributable to any funding organization.

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Context for the Study

In June 2007 the Governor of Maine signed legislation that required the state's 290 school administrative units (SAUs) to seek partners for a reorganization that would reduce the number of SAUs to approximately 80 Regional School Units (RSUs) (Maine State Legislature, 2007). This policy initiative is the first reorganization of Maine's school districts since 1957. The planning for reorganization is to be done by Regional Planning Committees (RPCs) that consist of representatives of the municipalities, school boards, and the general public. The initial timeline specified for submitting reorganization plans was short (June to December 2007), and there are specific financial penalties for school districts that do not reorganize. Several elements of the legislation, including the timeline, proposed number of RSUs, and requirements for RSU size, cost sharing, and shared governance generated considerable controversy. Partly in response to the controversy around the initial proposal, and after many failed legislative attempts at amending or repealing the law, a second bill was passed in April 2008 (Maine State Legislature, April 2008) that made significant changes to the initial mandate. This study examines the process and progress of school district reorganization, and perceptions of key actors about reorganization, drawing on data from case studies of five RPCs and RPCs statewide during the first year of the initiative. The five sample RPCs represent seven of the nine superintendent regions and differ in size, demographic, and governance characteristics, but may not represent the range of variation found in RPCs more broadly in the state.

Background

Maine is not alone in its efforts to reorganize or consolidate school districts. At least 17 states have considered legislation related to consolidation since 2005 (2007). Although the literature on school district consolidation is not extensive, published accounts of consolidation efforts in several states describe different ways that school districts and states have approached consolidation and various combinations of policy tools that states have used to encourage or require school districts to reduce administrative and other non-instructional costs (Plucker et al, 2007; Rural School and Community Trust, 2006). Published reports illuminate both positive and negative impacts or potential impacts of consolidation on such areas as academic opportunities, achievement, equity, school closures, and transportation costs (Hicks & Rusalkina, 2004; Johnson, 2006; Killeen & Sipple, 2000; Patterson, 2006; Plucker et al, 2007). Studies of the impact of district consolidation on educational costs suggest that considerable savings can be achieved if very small districts (500 or fewer students) consolidate with other districts, while there may be negligible cost savings if larger districts (1,500 or more students) consolidate with other districts (Andrews et al, 2002; Duncombe & Yinger, 2001).

The last significant consolidation initiative in Maine was the Sinclair Act of 1957 also known as the School Administrative District Law. This Act essentially created the education landscape as it exists today. In addition to changing the funding model to ensure minimum funding for all schools, creating a statewide minimum teacher salary, and providing increased state subsidy for new school construction, the Sinclair Act provided incentives for the consolidation of many small districts into larger regional school administrative districts (SADs).

Prior to the Sinclair Act, the majority of high schools in Maine enrolled under 100 students (Woodward, 1997), whereas in 2006-2007, the average enrollment in Maine high

schools, excluding alternative and expeditionary schools, was 518 students. The net result of the Sinclair Act was the consolidation of Maine's school districts to create the current 280 school administrative units, which are organized in one of five different organizational structures.

Donaldson (2007) provides an analysis of the impacts of the Sinclair act. Among his observations were the following:

- Consolidation of schools was well underway prior to Sinclair, particularly at the elementary level. It was encouraged by the state but carried out largely by the local towns and districts that bore 75% of the cost of education at that time.
- Sinclair resulted in the closure of town-centered secondary schools largely in rural areas and the building of regional secondary schools. The average high school enrollment grew from 260 to 472 in the 1960s.
- Fifty-six percent of town school boards were terminated and school unions were discouraged. Regional school districts, school boards, and administrative offices were formed serving 61% of municipalities by 1970.

Now, fifty years after the Sinclair Act, Maine is facing a similar attempt to consolidate school districts further. The current school district reorganization initiative might be viewed as a response of policymakers to multiple pressures. Kingdon (2002) offers a theoretical perspective that provides a useful lens for examining the creation of new policies. Kingdon describes problems, policies and politics as three streams that run through an organization each with a life of its own. Policy change occurs at the critical junctures when these three streams come together and an opportunity or policy window opens.

In Maine the problem stream included, most notably, high property taxes, several years of shortfalls in the state budget, a growing public awareness of the increasing cost of public

education, and decreasing student enrollment in Maine's public schools. These issues and recommendations for restructuring public education and finding efficiencies in education spending were included in a series of reports between 2004 and 2006 (State of Maine, 2004; The Brookings Institution, 2006; Maine State Board of Education Select Panel, 2006). In the policy stream were the Governor and Commissioner of Education with ideas about containing education costs and achieving greater efficiency in education spending by reducing the number of school administrative units. In the politics stream were legislators eager to find ways to reduce state spending. A policy window opened when a taxpayers' bill of rights (TABOR) was narrowly defeated in 2006 causing policymakers to feel the need to take action before this type of initiative could be put forward again (Higgins, 2006).

In January 2007, in a climate of growing public support for additional tax relief and decreasing state revenue projections, the Governor announced the current school district reorganization initiative; a reduction in the number of school administrative units from 290 to approximately 26 (Maine Municipal Association, 2007). In the legislative session following the Governor's proposal, twenty-six regions became "no more than eighty regions" with at least 2,500 students each, "...except where geography, demographics, population density, transportation challenges and other obstacles make 2,500 impractical. Where an enrollment of 2,500 is impractical, the units must aim to create units of 1,200 students." (Maine Department of Education, 2007)¹. Other exceptions were also allowed including school districts that, after due diligence could not identify partners, coastal islands, schools operated by tribal school committees, and several districts who were identified as "higher performing."

The rationale for this reorganization included creating school units that would provide: equitable educational opportunities, rigorous academic programs, uniformity in delivering

programs, greater uniformity in tax rates for the support of schools, efficient use of limited resources, the effective use of public funds, school choice, and the maximization of opportunities to deliver services that can be more effectively provided in larger districts (Maine State Legislature, 2007). The proposed penalties for SAUs that don't become part of a regional unit by July 2009 included:

- A 50% reduction in minimum subsidy (the special education minimum);
- A further 50% reduction in system administration funds;
- Less favorable consideration in approval and funding for school construction; and
- Loss of eligibility for transition adjustments (MDOE, 2007)¹

In support of the new legislation, the Maine Department of Education (MDOE) provided a suggested model for the reorganization of school administrative units into Regional School Units (RSUs) in May 2007, and in June 2007 began a series of statewide regional informational meetings. During the summer of 2007 extensive information and guidance related to the process of planning school district reorganization was provided by MDOE through regional visits and on a website and Regional Planning Committees (RPCs) were formed to do the work. RPCs consisted of representatives from the municipal governments, school boards, and the general public in each school district. State-trained facilitators were made available to all RPCs along with \$2,500 to support the planning effort although few SAUs requested this funding.

The MDOE established dates by which RPCs were to have accomplished specific tasks:

- August 31, 2007, file a Notice of Intent specifying partner SAUs to be included in an RSU;
- December 1, 2007, submit a Reorganization Plan to which MDOE will respond by December 15, 2007;

- January 15, 2008 municipalities hold a referendum on Reorganization Plans approved by December 15 2007;
- June 10, 2008, municipalities hold a referendum on plans approved after December 15 2007;
- November 4, 2008, last chance for municipalities to pass a referendum on consolidation plans prior to penalties being incurred;
- July 1, 2009, start date for new RSUs approved at referendum after January 15, 2008 and by November 4, 2008.

Several of these deadlines were later modified as it became clear that RPCs were struggling with certain parts of their reorganization plans and were aware that many proposals for amending and repealing the legislation would be made in the next legislative session. In fact, 60 bills were introduced in the state legislature in January 2008, ranging from proposals to modify elements of the legislation to one that would repeal the legislation entirely. This massive response from Maine communities was indicative of the level of controversy around the legislation, as well as the concern Maine citizens have about the survival of their local schools and community participation in school governance.

State legislators hammered out a bill that addressed concerns about cost-sharing arrangements and other perceived barriers to district consolidation, and included language that would have allowed the union structure for district governance to continue in Maine. Currently, the union structure allows for separate municipalities or districts to maintain their own school boards and even superintendents, while sharing a union-wide school board and superintendent. The Governor vetoed the bill, as expected, with the rationale that a union structure would not meet the goal of administrative efficiency. At the same time that legislators and the Governor

were facing off over how to amend the law, the House voted to repeal the entire consolidation law, but failed to do so by the two-thirds majority needed (Maine Municipal Association, 2008). The Governor put forward his own bill to allow more flexibility and clarity in the consolidation law, and also allowed for the creation of Alternative Organizational Structures (AOSs) at the Commissioner's discretion. The Governor's bill was finally approved by the House and Senate and signed into law April 18, 2008 (Maine State Legislature, April 2008).

In brief, the amended law allows for:

- local agreements for cost sharing among municipalities within an RSU, with the flexibility of determining the cost-sharing method using a combination of various factors such as enrollment or valuations;
- municipalities to retain ownership of school property as specified in a reorganization plan;
- the Commissioner of Education to approve a unit or a RSU with a total enrollment of 1,000 to 1,200 students, but no fewer than 1,000 students, if the unit or RSU is in an isolated rural area;
- the Commissioner of Education to approve a plan for an Alternative Organizational Structure (AOS) if the plan meets certain criteria (MDOE, April 2008³; Maine State Legislature, April 2008).

An Alternative Organizational Structure must consolidate system administration, including special education, transportation, and business functions, include a core curriculum, and have consistent (but separate, if desired) school policies, calendars, and collective bargaining agreements. In essence, communities may propose to form an AOS instead of a RSU, but they

must still function as a single school system with a single budget. While the amended law still does not allow the union governance structure, it does not specify the structure for the AOS either. The MDOE cautions that: “Exactly how applicants will build an alternative organizational plan is not specified in the new law, so creativity will be the order of the day and that creativity must be focused on student opportunity and achievement and the means to efficiently deliver services in a sustainable way” (MDOE, April 2008⁴).

In addition to these changes, the amended law also provided for some technical corrections and clarifications. For example, the law clarified the roles and responsibilities of the RSU board and local school committees, for plans that include the option to create local school committees. The amendment also streamlined the budget validation process, and moved the deadline for municipalities to approve their reorganization plan by referendum (from November 4, 2008 to January 30, 2009). The penalties for not approving a reorganization plan were simplified: those units would be subject to a two percent higher mill rate expectation (MDOE, 2008³; Maine State Legislature, April 2008). Units are still expected to implement their reorganized system by July 1, 2009.

In summary, in response to multiple pressures, the Maine legislature has required the reorganization of school districts. This will be the most significant change in the alignment of municipalities that support education and the organizational structure of Maine schools in over 50 years. This change is being directed by the Maine Department of Education and planned by Regional Planning Committees. At the RPC level, there is general agreement on the need for greater fiscal efficiency. However, ideas about the best way to achieve efficiency differ significantly from the approach prescribed by the legislation. Moreover, there is great uncertainty about the potential results of district consolidation for different communities.

Purpose

This study will examine the early implementation stage of the reorganization initiative. We apply Kingdon's (2002) policy framework of problems, policies, and politics, and his criteria for policy survival including technical feasibility and values acceptability. Specifically, this study explores: 1) the perceptions of school and community members about consolidation; 2) the process regional units use to achieve consolidation; and 3) the progress regional units make on the required tasks of consolidation. These tasks include: forming Regional Planning Committees (RPCs); selecting regional partners; developing Reorganization Plans for state approval; combining school budgets within regional units for a public vote; and aligning educational programs, staff contracts, calendars, and services within each Regional School Unit (RSU). The research questions guiding this study included the following:

- How have school districts and RPCs organized themselves to accomplish consolidation tasks?
- What factors were considered and processes used in RPCs' selection of partners and decision making?
- What supports and challenges have RPC members and superintendents identified related to consolidation tasks?
- What progress have school districts and RPCs made on consolidation tasks to date?
- What perceptions do RPC members and superintendents hold about the consolidation law, the planning process, and potential impacts of consolidation?

Methods

This study used a mixed-method research design that included both qualitative and quantitative data, and drew on data from a sample of five case studies and from school districts statewide. The sample and statewide data collection activities are described separately.

Case Studies

Five potential RSUs were selected as case studies. The characteristics of each RSU are described in Table 1. Collectively, the five cases represent seven of the nine superintendent regions of the state and vary on other demographic characteristics, including: number of participating town and districts; type of district configuration; total student enrollment; number of schools; number of square miles each RSU would encompass; median household income; and student poverty rate. Potential RSUs were selected from among the districts that were required to comply with the law, and that would have close to the 2,500 enrollment required.

Although the sample selection was based on the Maine Department of Education's (MDOE) initial map of suggested RSU configurations statewide, these configurations changed somewhat as districts chose different partners in some cases. Superintendents were contacted first to obtain their agreement to have their district participate in the study, and interview and survey participants received an informed consent letter describing the study and seeking their agreement to participate.

Table 1. Characteristics of Five Sample RPCs in Study

Regional Planning Committees Included in the Study	A	B	C	D	E
Number School Administrative Units within the Region*	4	2	3	6	14
Number towns	16	9	3	9	20
Number high schools	2	2	1	3	2
Number all schools	13	13	6	16	12
Attending students	3,500	2,500	1,500	7,000	2,500
Superintendent region in state	a	b	c	d	e,f,g
Total number square miles	658	225	108	290	558
Median household income	\$30,840	\$33,392	\$52,807	\$35,625	\$34,827
% students on free/reduced lunch	48%	47%	19%	39%	36%

Source: Maine Department of Education. Superintendent regions have been de-identified with code letters and approximate attendance figures are shown to maintain confidentiality. RPC E disbanded before a joint RSU plan could be submitted. *The number of SAUs indicated in this table was revised to reflect that within school unions each municipal system is a separate SAU.

Data were collected for the case studies through interviews, surveys, observation of meetings, and document analysis. Sources of data for each research question are described in Appendix A. Demographic data for districts were obtained from the MDOE. Each case was assigned to a single researcher, who conducted all the interviews and observations, and collected documents for that case. In the first round of data collection, a total of 44 interviews were conducted by phone with RPC facilitators, superintendents, and RPC members. RPC members were randomly selected from within each of the participating districts and constituent groups (municipal, school board, and general public) for the interview sample, and were invited by email to participate in the interview. The interviews were conducted from November 2007 through early March 2008 with most of them occurring in January and early February 2008. The interviews typically lasted from 30-60 minutes, followed a standard protocol, and were tape-

recorded and transcribed. The number of interviews conducted within each of the five sample RPCs is presented in Appendix B, table B1. A sample interview protocol is in Appendix D.

Surveys were administered to RPC members at a mid-November 2007 RPC meeting. All RPC members present at an RPC meeting were invited to participate. One RPC disbanded and members were invited to take the survey on-line in January 2008. A total of 100 completed surveys were received from the five sample RPC groups, representing 50%-56% of the RPC members in four of the groups, and 37% of the members in RPC B. The number of returned surveys for each of the five RPCs is found in Appendix B, table B2. The survey instrument is in Appendix C.

A second round of interviews and surveys is currently underway this May, to track changes in participants' views over time. This second round of data collection follows a three to four month hiatus, when many RPCs across the state suspended their meetings while they awaited the outcome of legislative work to amend the consolidation law. The amendment was passed April 18, 2008, after which RPCs resumed their meetings and their work with facilitators to reconsider their initial plans and, in many cases, even dramatically alter their plans or selection of partners. The results of the spring 2008 interviews and surveys will be reported separately.

As part of the fall 2007 data collection activity, we observed RPC meetings and wrote field notes describing the process observed and issues discussed by members. Documents collected from RPCs and districts included: RPC meeting agendas, meeting minutes, subcommittee proposals, subcommittee membership, reorganization plans and responses from the MDOE, and other information on district reorganization posted on district websites and blogs created by community members. We collected local news articles describing district

reorganization efforts and challenges and obtained state policies, implementation guidelines and updates issued by the MDOE or state legislature.

Statewide Data

Demographic data for districts were collected from the MDOE to inform both the selection of cases and data analyses. Data on reorganization plans submitted by RPCs statewide were also obtained from the MDOE. These plans were submitted by December 1, 2007 but were somewhat incomplete at that time. Most RPCs continued to work on these plans and submitted more complete plans by the next required submission date of March 28, 2008. The plans consisted of a checklist of required tasks indicating level of completion for each task, descriptions of barriers and assistance needed to complete tasks, and longer descriptions for each component of the plan. Because the legislative process of amending the law continued from January to April 18, 2008, some RPCs held off on submitting their revised plans until the specific requirements of the amended law were known. We report on changes in the plans for the five sample RPCs.

Data Analysis

Interview, observation, and document-based data were collected to answer research questions on how districts and RPCs organized themselves and what process they used to complete the tasks required by the state. Interviews and surveys were used to answer research questions on what perceptions participants held about the reorganization process, about challenges and supports encountered in the process, and about expected future impacts of district reorganization. While interviews explored the question of what progress was made on the required tasks, this question was primarily addressed by examination of the reorganization plans submitted by RPCs to the MDOE.

Qualitative data from interviews, observations, documents, and open-ended items on the survey or reorganization plans were organized and analyzed in relation to the research questions and for additional themes that surfaced. Detailed, descriptive summaries were written for each of the cases based on all qualitative data sources, and cross-case summaries were developed from the data sources and through discussion by the research team. Patterns were explored by comparing the process or perceptions within RPCs against demographic characteristics.

Quantitative data from the RPC member surveys were analyzed using SPSS software. Results were analyzed in aggregate form across all five RPC groups, and were also disaggregated to allow the researchers to explore possible patterns in the data. For example, the survey results were disaggregated by each of the five RPC groups, by the three constituencies that RPC members represented (school district, municipal, or public representatives), by the age of respondents and whether or not they have a child in the school system. Data from the formal reorganization plans submitted to the MDOE were quantified to compare differences in completion of the required tasks, and demographic data on districts were also used to explore patterns in completion of tasks by district and RPC characteristics.

In presenting the findings, information that could identify districts, schools, or communities has been removed from the quotations. In some cases, we have used pseudonyms for town names. In addition, some demographic information about participating districts may have been changed for this report, to maintain confidentiality of individuals and communities.

Findings

The early findings of this study are presented below and are organized by each of the five research questions.

Research Question 1: How have school districts and RPCs organized themselves to accomplish consolidation tasks?

The MDOE provided guidelines to assist communities in organizing themselves to produce a Reorganization Plan. These guidelines describe the RPC as the key administrative unit charged with developing the Plan. Developing the Plan required that the RPC respond to thirteen specific tasks described in a template provided by Drummond, Woodsum, and McMahon, a law firm in Maine and New Hampshire with specialization in school law. This section will describe the formation of RPCs in the study sample and how they approached the task of producing a Reorganization Plan.

The Formation of RPCs. The MDOE guidelines on the composition of the RPC are fairly broad and allow for some variation in implementation. The law and the guidelines stipulate that the RPC must include representatives from school boards, municipal government, and the general public. Specifically, the guidelines recommend that the RPC should include: at least one school board representative of each participating SAU, representatives of participating municipalities and members of the general public are residents of the potential RSU. There is no upper limit on the number of representatives from any of the three constituent groups.

In our study sample, we found that the three constituent groups were represented somewhat unevenly, with less representation of the general public. We also found that the number of representatives from each participating SAU varied across the five RPCs.

General public representatives to the RPCs in the study sample are typically individuals who were, or have been, deeply involved in school matters. In some instances, they are teachers from one of the participating SAUs and in other instances, former school board members, former superintendents or spouses or close relatives of school employees. When asked, “How were you selected as a representative of the general public?”, typical responses from RPC members indicated that many hold (or held) a position in a town or school district, making them a logical choice. Representatives of the general public, for example, stated:

I was chair of the town planning board, on the budget committee, and on the school committee in the past. (Jan. 08)

I’ve been on school board, town council, my husband was a principal. (Jan. 08)

So I went to the city council and spoke. I said that I would like to be the rep. . . . so I was. I’m also a teacher in Smith Town (Dec. 07)

In small Maine communities it is difficult to avoid family or other interconnections among representative groups that are assumed to separate entities. One municipal representative was appointed to the RPC by the board of selectmen. He also worked part time as a swimming coach in the school district and his wife worked as a teacher at the high school. Another RPC member confided, “The selectman out to Smith Town picked his daughter. She was a fine member. The two from Brown Town are husband and wife. It’s been real interesting.” (Dec. 07)

The size of the RPCs in the study sample differed due to the number of municipalities and SAUs participating in planning a RSU, and because some communities sent more than one representative from each of the three constituent groups, or disregarded MDOE’s guidelines for representation. In some RPCs, alternates participated as full members. Table 2 describes the constituency, structure and decision-making characteristics of the five RPCs in the study sample. Larger RPCs (A and E) represent more communities and therefore have more RPC members.

Table 2. Constituency, Structure and Decision-making in Five Sample RPCs

RPC	Number of SAUs	Number of municipalities	Number of RPC Members	Facilitator (Y/N)	Number of Subcommittees	Method of decision making
A	4	17	47	Y	6	Vote
B	2	9	27	Y	4	Vote
C	3	3	14	Y	3	Consensus
D	3	8	40	N	4	Vote
E	7	20	*45 – 57	Y	6	Vote

* Another SAU joined after the RPC was initially formed, increasing the number of members.

RPCs in the study sample divided the required tasks for developing a Reorganization Plan in different ways. All RPCs used a subcommittee structure, and larger RPCs created more subcommittees than smaller RPCs either to divide the workload into manageable portions or to keep the number of subcommittee members reasonably small. All five RPCs had subcommittees on finance and governance. Three RPCs had subcommittees on contracts, personnel, and transition issues. Although not a required part of the Reorganization Plan, three of the five RPCs formed subcommittees on curriculum and educational planning. One also had a subcommittee for extra-curricular and co-curricular issues.

Decision making in subcommittees was typically by consensus but when subcommittees presented their decisions to the whole RPC, votes were taken, except in RPC C where whole group decisions were made by consensus.

Roles of Facilitators and Superintendents. State-trained facilitators and superintendents played key roles in the organization of communities to accomplish the task of school district reorganization. Four of the five study sample RPCs hired a state-trained facilitator. The fifth RPC, in which some consolidation activities had preceded the reorganization initiative, permitted the two superintendents to serve as rotating co-chairs so that no district was advantaged and so that on-going work would continue.

Facilitators' roles and those of the participating superintendents differed significantly among the RPCs. Facilitators were typically former superintendents or educational consultants who had received training sponsored by MDOE and were invited to meet monthly with MDOE personnel to share the progress and challenges of the RPCs with which they were working. Facilitators had different leadership styles and biases that may have influenced the decisions and progress of the RPCs.

One facilitator was elected chair of the RPC and, in addition to providing requested information about the reorganization legislation and guidelines, assumed a highly directive manner, setting specific agendas, and calling for votes on every decision. One other facilitator was fairly directive in leading the RPC. The remaining two facilitators were less directive, in that they spent more time helping their RPCs to explore educational philosophies and allowed a slower pace in completing the planning tasks. Facilitators provided essential information and suggestions about the tasks on which the RPC and its subcommittees were working.

Superintendents were precluded from membership on RPCs, but were often very influential in the decision making. Most superintendents attended the meetings and served in a supportive role, providing information about their SAU and about the laws and regulations that apply to schools and school districts. One superintendent described her role as follows:

I see my role as supplying correct information to the RPC committee, numbers, staff, whatever they need. It's got to be correct. Those folks are not in education for the most part and they are seeking our advice and our opinion. Whenever, it's asked I try to offer it in an impartial manner and keep it factual. (Jan. 08)

While superintendents primarily assumed a supportive role in the RPC process, allowing the RPC to work through the various components of the consolidation plan and come to consensus, superintendents still wielded considerable influence over the choice of district partners and the planning process. They sometimes held tight control over decisions about the

agenda and which proposals were put forward in meetings. In one RPC, some RPC members felt their superintendents made too many decisions outside the RPC. A school board representative said: "I think they might be a little too involved in behind-the-scenes decisions." (Feb. 08) A community representative said,

I didn't realize how much of an active role they had already had prior to us even meeting. And how much discussion had taken place prior to the meetings. They already had determined what committees would be needed before we even met. (Jan. 08)

Facilitators were generally perceived as third-party experts who could offer information and suggestions, moderate discussions, keep lines of communication open, and provide assistance with the process of decision making. One superintendent described the facilitator assigned to his group as follows:

He acted as a guide. He acted as an independent person in the process who could step back and take a big picture look at it and guide people to where they needed to go in the conversations. He did the organization, the planning, along with the superintendents, with not only the nuts and bolts but also the bigger picture of "where do we want to go." And he basically guided and led the conversations. (Dec. 07)

A municipal representative in another RPC offered the following description of the role of the facilitator:

The facilitator is very skilled at keeping the angst down at our meetings. Until the most recent meeting, we've sailed right along. And even when there has been controversy, like at the last meeting, he handled it pretty well – and fairly. (Jan. 08)

The relationships between facilitators and superintendents differed, and in some instances may have influenced the RPC process. When asked about the role of the facilitator in her RPC one superintendent responded,

At the first meeting we had I was astounded. I couldn't believe what I was hearing. I was saying "Oh my word! If this is the way this is going to continue it isn't going to work." We had a talk with him and it was quite a bit different after that. (Jan. 08)

The superintendents in this RPC felt the facilitator was being too directive in his leadership of the RPC group and not allowing time for RPC members to help determine the process and decisions. The superintendents asked the facilitator to assume a less directive manner.

Another superintendent indicated that he perceived the facilitator as having a personal bias that influenced his judgment and actions.

. . . it was clear that he was no fan of this law. And I think, again this is just my judgment, that he provided an opening that helped perpetuate to some extent the people's feeling that it was a bad law and that it would likely be changed. (Dec. 07)

Interviewees in two RPCs expressed the view that their facilitator held biases that influenced the decision-making process. In one RPC, the facilitator allowed a district to propose an alternative governance plan that competed with a plan generated within the RPC's governance subcommittee. Some superintendents and RPC members were angered by this action, believing that the facilitator was siding with one district at the expense of others. In another RPC, the facilitator spoke in support of one district's proposal to reopen a governance issue that had already been decided by the whole RPC.

In summary, MDOE guidelines for the formation of RPCs, the prescribed tasks of the Drummond and Woodsum template, and the guidance of superintendents and state trained facilitators provided the organizational structure that communities used to approach the task of developing a Reorganization Plan. Although there were clear differences in how the guidelines were followed and the rate of progress among the five sample RPCs, all but one RPC submitted Reorganization Plans by the December 1, 2007 deadline. These differences might also be attributed to the composition of the RPCs, and the different personal styles and biases of superintendents and facilitators.

Research Question 2: What factors were considered and processes used in RPCs' selection of partners and decision making?

This study attempts to understand how RPCs made critical decisions about the future of their schools and communities and how those decisions were influenced. Initial decisions about which SAUs to partner with were made prior to the required submission of Notices of Intent on or before August 31, 2007. Many more decisions about what a partnership would look like and how it would function were made prior to the submission of Reorganization Plans by December 1, 2007. The sections below will describe the factors that RPCs considered and the processes used to make these decisions.

Selection of Partners. The RPCs in the study sample were only getting organized in the months preceding the August 31 deadline for SAUs to submit a Notice of Intent that specified other SAUs with which they intended to partner. Some RPCs were not fully constituted until well into the fall because some communities found it difficult to identify suitable partners.

Interview data and field notes indicate that exploratory work with potential partners was done by superintendents and school boards. Since some RPC members were also elected members of school boards, they participated in these early discussions and decisions. Those RPC members who represented the general public, however, were often not involved in the initial selection of partners. One RPC representative of the general public commented, "This was strictly a political decision, which was made before we even met as a committee." (Jan. 08). Although MDOE described one of the RPC's responsibilities to be, "Hold one or more public meetings to gather input from/determine sentiment of community members," (MDOE, 2007), few public meetings were held in the study sample prior to the selection of partners and the submission of the Notices of Intent. Websites in some districts posted RPC meeting dates,

agendas, subcommittee proposals and minutes of meetings, while other districts did not post this information. In addition, RPC meetings were open to the public, but typically for providing information rather than soliciting it. One school committee member commented...

There were no meetings in my community about whom to partner with. We had town meetings of elected officials. There was not a lot of public input. (Jan. 08).

Many factors were weighed as SAUs considered other SAUs as partners. The most common concerns reflected in interview data include those represented below.

Preservation of small town culture. Respondents in small communities explored partnerships with other communities of similar size, economic status, and culture anticipating less disagreement about education issues. One superintendent described how his district felt more comfortable engaging in partnership talks with district leaders in another RPC (outside the study sample), because of the welcoming attitude of the other district and the similarity in size and culture among their communities:

The towns to our east, they have been inviting. . . . The school board and superintendent said, "We welcome your participation. We feel we have common values.." . . We began to feel much more comfortable with these Jackson County towns. No town is more than 2,000 people. Appleville is the largest town. And there was just a real comfort level there. (Dec. 07)

Expanded geographic areas and administrative workloads. Some respondents expressed concern about the difficulty a superintendent might have in supervising staff in very large geographic regions. One superintendent, considering a vastly expanded geographic region in a proposed RSU commented...

. . . when I do find time I go out and visit the schools, and I know almost all our employees by first name. That's going to disappear. At least it's not going to be as intimate as it was in the past. I am concerned about the workload. Our central office is pretty much out straight all the time. If you add x number of students and x number of staff to it there's just that much more we have to do." (Jan. 08)

Prior history of collaboration. Some SAUs in the sample had histories of working together on such issues as bulk purchasing, transportation, and lunch programs.

We had a long-standing relationship with [district x] about regionalization. Maintenance efforts, common copier contracts, we service their buses. . . . Our natural alliance was with [district x] (Jan. 08)

School choice. Developing a partnership with a community that had school choice was a concern of many respondents. The possibility that these communities would send students to high schools outside the RSU was a major concern and many school choice communities were adamant that school choice be preserved. Although the reorganization law protects school choice, many involved in the RPC process expressed doubts about the stability of protections. One superintendent expressed this as follows,

Where the law allowed for choice, that the choice might remain. There's a great deal of mistrust in the state government. One of the things I consistently heard from people was: "Well, that's what the law says right now, but what about five years from now?" (Dec. 07)

Lack of fidelity. SAUs that vacillated in their preference for partners, or pursued more than one partnership at a time were viewed as disingenuous and less trustworthy partners. When an SAU group presented an alternative governance proposal to a RPC, one school board representative to the RPC commented....

I wouldn't say there are bad feelings, I'd say a little distrust. I wasn't impressed with the way they did the back door thing [Smith Town members came up with their own governance proposal outside the RPC] and what they wanted us to agree to wasn't going to benefit anybody but them. (Jan. 08)

Cost and debt. Respondents frequently indicated that they were less willing to partner with SAUs that would cause an increase in their tax rates. A municipal representative commented, "The one thing we didn't want was to partner with a town that would bring us a lot of debt." (Feb. 08)

In early September MDOE reported that all 290 SAUs submitted Notices of Intent by August 31. Thirty nine indicated they would file an Alternative Plan while the remaining 251 specified partners that would be included in their Reorganization Plans. One hundred of these or 40% listed two or more possible configurations of partnerships. The late start up of many RPCs in the summer and fall of 2007 and the number of factors to be carefully weighed may be attributed with the large number of undecided partnerships.

The process of decision making. An examination of interview data reveals that the processes of gaining consensus in subcommittees and voting on recommendations by the whole RPC were common in the study sample. Data were also collected on the process of RPC decision making and the views held of the process by RPC members.

Survey data indicate that RPC members were generally satisfied with the subcommittee structure and the support of superintendents, facilitators and the Drummond Woodsum workshops and templates. Eighty-two percent of RPC members agreed or strongly agreed that RPC meetings allowed members to share their opinions and 59% agreed or strongly agreed that RPC subcommittees had worked well. Fifty-eight percent agreed or strongly agreed that the facilitator effectively guided the process and 53% indicated that their voices were heard.

Interview data confirmed the general agreement that the organization of RPCs and the process of developing Reorganization Plans worked well and were fair to all participants. Many RPC members said that they enjoyed to opportunity to meet individuals from other communities who were concerned about education. One school board representative to the RPC commented on the tenor of discussions in her subcommittee:

We had three people from the community and that was nice. We seemed to blend fairly well and we were able to get our task done fairly quickly. We discussed it, we had differences of opinion but we were able to come up with something we

could all live with. I'm not saying we all agreed on it, but we could live with it. Our group worked very well. (Nov. 07)

Some RPC members expressed concerns about decisions that had been made prior to or outside of the RPC discussions. One community representative suggested that RPC leadership had been pre selected by the superintendents and facilitator:

I didn't realize how much of an active role they had already had prior to us even meeting. And how much discussion had taken place prior to the meetings. They already had determined what committees would be needed before we even met. (Jan. 08)

Other RPC members were also dismayed about the decisions that were being made without meaningful input from the public. Few public meetings were held outside the RPC meetings to solicit public input. The public was generally invited to attend RPC meetings, but few attended. Some districts held public meetings in the fall, but these were focused on providing information about the status of RPC work. Comments regarding the lack of public input into the decision-making process included:

The public doesn't come to the meetings. When I go to places like Wal-Mart I hear people talking, but they don't come to the meetings. (Jan. 08)

We have tried to engage the community, but very few of them come. Some think it's a foregone conclusion. Many trust the people who are there to work out the detail. (Feb. 08)

In summary, communities were given a very short period of time to make decisions that would change the structure of their education systems that had typically been in place for 50 years. The initial selection of SAUs with which to partner was done with little public input or serious consideration by RPCs. As fall 2007 progressed, many partnership decisions were solidified as RPCs gained information and spent the time needed to do their work. Generally, RPC members believed that their subcommittee and decision making processes worked well,

although in several instances concerns were expressed about decisions made by superintendents and facilitators outside of RPC meetings.

Research Question 3: What supports and challenges have RPC members and superintendents identified related to their work on consolidation tasks?

Supports. RPC members strongly indicated in both the survey and interviews that the chief support for the work on consolidation came from the helpful assistance of superintendents and facilitators. The legislation and MDOE guidelines did not establish a clear role for superintendents in the consolidation process, and did not allow superintendents to be members of the RPC. Yet, the expertise and assistance of superintendents and their central office staff were critical in the support of RPC decision-making. Superintendents worked behind the scenes to establish relationships between school district administrations and school boards, plan RPC meetings and guide the consolidation planning process, and keep the public informed through public meetings or district websites. Superintendents directly supported the work of the RPC subcommittees by providing financial, enrollment, or other information as needed, and they sometimes took a more active role in facilitating subcommittee discussions, advising when financial or legal questions arose, recording minutes and results of votes on proposals, and even facilitating the entire RPC meeting where there was no outside facilitator (as was the case in RPC D).

On the survey, over 80% of the RPC member respondents agreed with each of the two statements: *The administrators from the school district I represent have provided information as requested by the RPC*; and *One or more superintendents have played a leadership role in the RPC process*. In the interviews, RPC members highly praised superintendents for the expertise and assistance they provided, and described superintendents as being objective and fair in their

work with the RPCs. One community representative commented, “The superintendent was very good. We asked for things and whatever we asked for he got for us. I thought all the superintendents were extremely responsive in providing information and anticipating what we would need.” (Jan. 08) A facilitator said,

Whenever the superintendents didn’t know something, they always said, “We don’t have that information, but we’ll get it.” It was really honest. Both the superintendents have been brilliant – spending incredible numbers of hours providing information to the subcommittees and to the public. (Jan. 08)

A community member described how a superintendent facilitated a subcommittee in a neutral manner: “Very objectively, he would ask us, ‘What do you think the benefits would be?’ ‘What do you think the downfall would be?’ (Jan. 08)

Superintendents described the time and effort both they and their business managers have invested in providing the necessary financial information requested by RPC subcommittees. One superintendent said, “I thought in August if I put in an hour a day for the week that would be enough to keep my head above water. Not even close. (March 08)

A few RPC members and superintendents said that the state should have provided some financial help to support the personnel time needed to collect and analyze fiscal data and run models for the RPC planning process, but this was not a major complaint.

Four of the five RPCs in this study sample indicated they had good facilitation of meetings. RPC D had two superintendents take turns facilitating the meetings, and members were satisfied with this arrangement. For the four RPCs that worked with a state-trained facilitator, three RPCs were generally satisfied with the facilitator’s assistance, while members in one RPC expressed dissatisfaction with their facilitator. In that RPC, members felt the facilitator was not providing enough assistance or information.

In the three RPCs with strong facilitator assistance, the facilitator met with the superintendents to plan meetings, kept the meetings running efficiently according to the agenda, moderated discussions, established rules and oversaw the RPC voting process, assisted subcommittees, provided information on MDOE requirements to guide the process, and generally kept the process moving to help the RPC meet the tight deadlines established by the MDOE. Two of the four facilitators were former superintendents, so their knowledge of school budgeting was particularly helpful.

On the survey, 58% of the RPC member respondents agreed with the statement: *The facilitator has effectively guided the process*. In the interviews, community representatives in one RPC described their facilitator's assistance this way: "I thought the facilitator was really thoughtful about how we needed to work together, to bring our ideas together and sort of started with a lower level of sharing of 'What does everybody want in their schools?'" (Jan. 08) and, "He did a good job of trying to keep us all on a good timeframe and kept us on track." (Jan. 08) In another RPC, a superintendent commented, "When people tend to get a little huffy, he tries to bring them back and refocuses them, and he reminds them why we're there and to treat others with respect." (Feb. 08)

In addition to the support of superintendents and state-trained facilitators, interviewees described other things that facilitated their work. For example, superintendents, facilitators, and RPC members said the fact that RPC members took this work seriously and worked conscientiously was helpful in moving the process forward. Although superintendents and RPC members did not agree with all aspects of the law, and many opposed the policy of mandating consolidation, they nonetheless resigned themselves to "getting the job done" as required. A

municipal representative stated, “The fact that people have taken this seriously. That’s been helpful.” (Jan. 08) A superintendent and a facilitator made these comments:

The willingness of the RPC members to come to meetings and plan actively was wonderful. It was a real pleasure to work with them and to work with my fellow superintendents—especially since we’re all working ourselves out of a job! (Dec. 07)

If we had time and were left alone, we could come up with something that would really work . . . But they got together and did a good job. They are sincere in developing a plan that people will support. (Jan. 08)

RPC members noted that it was helpful to have opportunities to work closely with members from other school districts within the subcommittee structure. This structure allowed members to work in small groups with representatives from various districts, where they came to better understand each others’ concerns and priorities, and learned about the educational programs and spending habits of neighboring districts. Honest discussions within the subcommittees and whole RPCs allowed for many difficult issues to be worked out. In most cases, RPC members felt they had established closer working relationships among members across districts, and that this would have a positive impact on the work of the future RSU board.

A municipal representative described it this way:

We got to know each other quite well [on my subcommittee]. We learned to respect each other. Initially there was some tension, and some discomfort as there will always be in these kinds of groups. We all recognized that we had different needs but that, on balance, we had a lot of common ground. We worked on enlarging the boundaries of that common ground. (Jan. 08)

Superintendents and RPC members specifically mentioned the template developed by the Drummond and Woodsum law firm and that firm’s workshops as being helpful to the work of the RPC. While the template enumerated the required tasks, RPC members said they wished the template had included more guidance on what would be acceptable for certain components of the

plan, such as the specifics of cost sharing and what powers could be assigned to local school committees.

Challenges. Both the survey and interview findings strongly indicated that the most controversial decisions or issues for RPC planning fell into three categories: governance, finance, and local control. Other contextual factors, such as the short timeframe allowed for the work and uncertainty surrounding the law, also presented challenges or obstacles in the planning work. Each type of challenge is described in turn in this section.

Decisions about governance and finance were difficult for three of the five sample RPCs. Governance issues that were difficult to reach consensus on included: deciding on the basis of representation for the RSU school boards (e.g., by school or by community), as some communities do not operate schools; the number of representatives from each entity and respective voting weights for each; voting rules, such as what constitutes a “majority” vote; whether or not to allow for local school committees and the scope of their powers. On the survey, 78% of RPC member respondents indicated that *representation on the RSU board* was a significant/ highly significant challenge, and 58% indicated that *the authority granted to local school committees* was a significant/ highly significant challenge.

Across the five sample RPCs, RPC members from smaller communities/ districts expressed strong concerns about being outnumbered and outvoted by larger communities/ districts, as the voting weights are tied to enrollment. These representatives had a hard time believing that members of a regional school board would keep the interests of all students at heart rather than making decisions based on the interests of the community they represent. One school board representative commented,

Because Bayville is the largest town in the combined district there seemed to be a little fear that it could change the entire board on a decision. . . . small towns

really struggled with that. . . . And it was the potential closure of small schools that drove most of the worry. . . . That was the big issue—trust, or lack of trust. (Jan. 08)

In another RPC, members representing smaller districts agreed to a 60% majority vote for RSU board decisions in the plan filed by December 1, 2007, while two larger districts pushed for a simple majority of 51% and a re-vote in January 2008. This issue was still a source of tension within the RPC as late as March-April, 2008. A superintendent said,

The governance structure for the new school board has been the most contentious issue. The small towns feel like the big towns will gang up on the small towns. But I don't think these board members will vote as a block. However, this 60% vote seems to be a power play. . . . Ultimately, it might cause the whole consolidation to break down. (Jan. 08)

Despite the challenge of governance issues, RPC members generally indicated that they felt these issues could be worked out eventually to the satisfaction of most RPC members. Subcommittees proposed plans, listened to the feedback of the whole RPC, and revised their plans with the goal of obtaining consensus. Four of the sample RPCs had decided on most governance issues by the December 1 deadline for filing RSU plans. Only the RPC that disbanded in November failed to resolve governance issues. One superintendent commented in an interview, "Governance didn't slow us down; it just took a long time to wade through it." (Jan. 08)

Decisions related to finance that presented serious obstacles for three of the five sample RPCs included: cost sharing—where some districts pay more for their educational programs and have higher teacher salaries and benefits levels than other districts; debt burden—where some districts have higher debt due to recent school construction costs; ownership of school facilities and other property and assets; and personnel contracts and bargaining agreements—beyond the issue of cost sharing, is the issue of when to renegotiate contracts and to what levels. On the

survey, 93% of RPC member respondents indicated that *the potential for increased tax rates for education* was a significant/ highly significant challenge, 85% indicated that *concerns about cost sharing* were significant/ highly significant, and 81% indicated that *concerns about existing contracts* were significant/ highly significant. Seventy percent of the respondents indicated that *disposition of property* was a significant/ highly significant challenge. In the plans filed by the December 1 deadline, three of the five sample RPCs indicated that cost sharing and/or the task of estimating cost savings were barriers, and one sample RPC requested assistance on this.

RPC members from smaller districts often voiced concerns that higher tax rates for smaller communities would result from cost sharing within a larger RSU. A community representative said, “We did all the easy stuff on the Drummond and Woodsum template early on, and now we’re getting to the more contentious financial issues.” (Jan. 08) A superintendent stated, “A huge issue for [district X] is the cost sharing impact. . . . There is some new school construction going on that will have to be cost-shared. Towns don’t want to take on debt.” (E05S, Dec 07) Another superintendent explained the barrier presented by differences in teacher salaries:

I think the last big issue is going to be the cost sharing issue, how we’re going to work that out, because that’s huge—well over a million dollars. Unless that’s worked out satisfactorily, that’s going to kill it right there, because people who would incur the increased cost, which is our district, are going to clearly vote “no.” (Jan. 08)

By November- December 2007, it became clear that financial issues represented a chief obstacle and governance issues also presented a challenge for many RPCs statewide. Of the 39 RPCs statewide that submitted a plan in December and also included at least two school administrative units, 11 indicated that estimating cost savings was a barrier and seven of these RPCs requested assistance on this (see Appendix G). These numbers appear to be much smaller

than the actual number of SAUs experiencing difficulty estimating cost savings, as reported in bi-monthly facilitators' meetings and in news articles. Composition of the governing body (i.e., the number of representatives per municipality), disposition of property, and disposition of existing debts were each identified as obstacles by four RPCs. Apportionment of votes within the governing body (i.e., the number of votes per member or voting weights) and method of voting were each identified as obstacles by three RPCs. Other barriers were identified by only two or fewer RPCs. It is unclear why relatively few RPCs identified these elements as barriers on the forms submitted to the MDOE in December. It may be that while many RPCs statewide have struggled to make decisions on these more contentious issues, they do not feel they are insurmountable challenges. Perhaps they just needed more time to work out the specifics for these elements of the plan.

Concerns about local control were strongly tied to decisions about governance and finance, but also included decisions about other areas such as: educational programs; spending levels; hiring of teachers; choice of high schools for K-8 districts; and ownership and use of school property. On the survey, 93% of the RPC member respondents indicated that *potential loss of local control* was a significant/ highly significant challenge, 79% indicated that *different philosophies about education among communities* was significant and the same percentage indicated that *fear that small schools might be closed* was significant, and 65% indicated that *concern about loss of school choice in some communities* was significant.

Four of the five sample RPCs indicated that local control issues presented obstacles in their planning, and four of the RPCs indicated that concerns about high school choice was a contentious issue. Local control issues clearly impeded progress for a time on completing the required consolidation tasks in three of the RPCs, and one RPC disbanded primarily due to these

issues. Generally, RPC members in small, rural districts were more opposed to the consolidation law and expressed stronger concern about loss of local control.

Although their RPC plans included provisions to represent the small districts and some allowed for local school committees, many RPC members did not believe that the future RSU board would continue to keep small schools open or maintain the tradition of high school choice for K-8 districts. These members felt they would be outvoted on the RSU board and that other districts would put greater priority on efficiency than local concerns about education. A community representative explained,

Number one I would say is the loss of local control. That is major. Wanting to have some type of a say in the decision process is huge, especially when it affects our kids and our tax dollars. And not seeing any provision in the statute for that to happen. The words “local advisory board” kept coming up, but advisory is just suggestive. We didn’t feel that would be enough. (Jan. 08)

Other interviewees talked about the importance of the school building in the community’s identity and as a meeting place. A school board member said,

In small towns what we care about is we use our schools hard. By that I mean for community meetings, for an after school program, a basketball game, and the next day it’s a boy scout meeting. The schools are the center of our communities. And we’ll lose control over scheduling, staffing, maintenance. (Jan. 08)

High school choice was a contentious issue for various reasons. Districts that don’t have school choice feel it is unfair for only some districts in the RSU to have this option. The K-8 districts that traditionally have had high school choice want to maintain it. And, some of these districts may be much closer geographically to high schools in other RSUs than the high school in their own RSU. Some high schools are near capacity enrollment, and may not realistically be able to absorb many students from other districts in the RSU. A community representative said,

What citizens in my town wanted, we wanted to stay in control of our schools and we want to keep school choice—high school choice. That may be the biggest issue. . . . The law is written to say that school choice will stay, but we were

suspicious. We felt that over time, there would be pressure to send our kids to [high school A] (Jan. 08)

Another RPC worked out a plan to gradually have all students in the RSU attend the larger high school. A community representative described the decision this way:

When the subcommittee on school choice presented their decision to the larger group, they were met with absolute silence. We were amazed that they came up with this compromise. It seems to accommodate everyone's concerns. . . . I am not sure what will happen when it comes to a vote in the respective towns. (Jan. 08)

In Maine, enthusiasm for local sports teams is a big part of the community culture. Concerns about students' access to different sports programs in the high schools and the traditional loyalty to local teams surfaced in the RPC discussions. Districts that had school choice wanted to keep this option so parents could choose high schools, in part, based on the availability of sports programs. Some comments in the interviews included the following: "We went around in circles on 'What's the impact on sports? Is every school going to have the same sports?' . . . Everybody wants to make sure their kid has the best opportunity possible." (Jan. 08) and, "My husband will vote against it. My son plays hockey. [District X] doesn't have it. I made the compromise and sent my son somewhere else." (Jan. 08) and, "The drawback is that the athletic groups [from the two districts] have been in competition for years, and that would be lost. They hold that pretty close to heart you know." (Jan. 08)

Some RPC members said the participating districts held different educational philosophies and this was a source of contention. A municipal representative explained, "And talk about maintaining the culture of the high school. [Our community] felt strongly about that. There was a teacher who spoke very passionately about this. They want Mapletown kids to have a Mapletown education." (Jan. 08) This RPC convened a committee external to the RPC to focus on developing shared educational goals within the RSU.

While many interviewees voiced concerns related to local control issues, others dismissed these arguments, stating that local control is only a perception and is no longer much of a reality, given the extensive state and federal regulation of education. A school board representative said, “They talk about local control and all that, but that’s just a smoke screen. It doesn’t exist.” (Jan. 08) A municipal representative in another RPC offered this comment:

Some people feel local control should stay in place. I feel that’s a straw issue. I don’t think there is much local control now. I don’t think we’re losing that much. I think the governance committee addressed that issue, and made sure that towns would continue to have an active role to play if they want to in the overall governance of the RSU. (Jan. 08)

Other interviewees said that concerns about local control will dissipate over time, and that it will merely take time for the people of Maine to adjust to the idea of larger school systems and a regional approach. They said any kind of change is always difficult. One school board representative said, “People are feeling the loss of local control and local representation, but I think that will pass. That’s just a change factor. Any time people change, there’s resistance to it, no matter what.” (Jan. 08)

In addition to the challenge of reaching consensus on governance, finance, and local control issues, superintendents and RPC members said in the interviews that other conditions or factors made it difficult for members to support the law or to complete tasks within the short timeframe. These conditions or factors included: the short timeframe allowed for the work; lack of critical information at decision points; uncertainty about the status and stability of the law; belief that consolidation would not result in a net savings of education costs at the local level; opposition to mandated consolidation or a “one-size-fits-all” approach; distrust among some districts based on their prior history/ relationship; lack of expertise in education and finance among RPC representatives.

Interviewees in four of the five sample RPCs said it was difficult to accomplish the required planning tasks by the specified deadlines. Some members commented, “We’re doing this work with a gun to our head,” given the short timeframe and fiscal penalties for non-compliance. In some cases, RPC members said they felt forced to make decisions that were not optimal just to meet the December 1, 2007 deadline. Interviewees in one RPC felt they could have worked out differences and avoided dissolving their RPC if they had had more time. A superintendent in this RPC said, “The timeline had a lot to do with the decision. The pressures from the timeline did not make for good decision making.” (Dec. 07) While many RPCs started work in July or August, initial subcommittee proposals for components of the plan were generally not ready until late September or October, which left little time for discussion and resolving disagreement prior to a vote. Decisions involving cost sharing, debt sharing, and governance were particularly thorny and complex, and required more time to figure out. A community representative stated, “Another concern is the deadlines that are put on us. No one feels it’s adequate time. These are huge decisions to make. We’re all educated, but we’re not specialists.” (Jan. 08)

Not having certain kinds of information was also a challenge for RPCs. On the November 2007 survey, 59% of the RPC member respondents disagreed with the statement: *My RPC has the information needed to make decisions about school district reorganization*. Four of the five sample RPCs indicated they did not receive school finance information or guidance on requirements from the MDOE in a timely manner to move forward on some decisions. Sometimes RPCs needed to have a question answered about legal issues, about what powers could be delegated to local school committees, or about what different cost-sharing arrangements would be allowed under the law. RPC members said that the law was too vague on some points.

Some of the financial information became available later in December, which was too late for the December 1 deadline. RPC members indicated that they wanted to have cost projections for the next two years, while MDOE personnel indicated to RPCs that this would be difficult to project given the uncertainty about the state budget in future years. One community representative said, “We’re doing the best we can, but some [information] is unknowable—budget information.”

(Jan. 08) A municipal representative stated,

We certainly lack information from the state. . . . We’ve really had to dig into that ourselves. . . . Some of the financial templates [provided by the MDOE] didn’t prove to be as beneficial as we had hoped. In terms of projecting, two years from now, how much is this going to cost--there wasn’t a clear template provided from the state. (Jan. 08)

Superintendents and RPC members with expertise in school finance ran cost models for different combinations of district partners to inform RPC decision-making, but this was a very complex undertaking with many uncertain factors. Even within the RPCs, districts and members did not always agree on the budget projections and estimates of cost impacts for consolidation.

The planning for school district consolidation took place within the context of great uncertainty over the status and stability of the consolidation law, which left RPC members wondering if their efforts would be in vain. While RPCs were busy developing their plans in fall 2007, opposition to the law gathered steam. A petition drive was initiated by a small, coastal district to ask Maine voters in a fall 2008 referendum if the consolidation law should be repealed. Ultimately, the petition fell short of the required number of signatures, but other efforts to repeal the law may surface.

During the fall, the MDOE received a great deal of feedback from facilitators and districts about the challenges and obstacles they faced in meeting the law’s requirements and the deadlines, and it became clear that legislators would begin the process of amending the

legislation and moving back the implementation date when the legislature reconvened in January 2008. Further, interviewees commented on the recent history of state education mandates that required huge effort from districts to implement, only to have the mandates revoked shortly thereafter. All of these factors created a high level of uncertainty about the law and caused RPC members to wonder what changes would be made in the law and implementation guidelines even while they continued to work on the plans, if voters would support a repeal of the law, and if voters would approve the RSU plans in a June 2008 or November 2008 referendum. A municipal representative commented, “There’s lots of confusion, especially now. Fear that we have invested, volunteered this time, and it may all change.” (Jan. 08) Two superintendents made the following comments:

They [RPC members] were fearful that the law might change. Where the law allowed for choice, that the choice might not remain. There’s a great deal of mistrust in the state government. One of the things I consistently heard from people was: “Well, that’s what the law says right now, but what about five years from now?” (Dec. 07)

The state has a history of changing courses, which undermines everyone’s investment in these kinds of initiatives. Everyone is truly thinking this is all just a bad dream, and we’re going to wake up. . . . Everyone resents this forced march kind of thing. (Jan. 08)

With regard to the uncertainty about the public’s reaction to RSU plans, a school board representative said, “No one can guess how the voting will go.” (Jan. 08) A superintendent was pessimistic about the chances for the RSU plan to be approved by voters: “If this gets voted down, does that mean this is all for nothing? In the best case scenario, this all works and the vote goes through. I don’t see that happening in the current environment.” (Jan. 08)

Superintendents and RPC members also shared a belief that there would not be a net savings in educational costs at the local level, at least for the first few years immediately

following consolidation. They said that the impact of cost sharing, particularly raising teachers' salaries and benefits, and debt sharing, would raise the cost of education and property taxes for many communities. Superintendents and RPC members also said in the interviews that they expected a larger RSU would require more central office personnel. The expectation for higher costs or no cost savings left people feeling less than enthusiastic about spending so much time and effort on this work, and made them doubtful that voters would approve the plans in referenda. A superintendent said, "The big issue is really: 'Are there any cost savings?' So far we haven't been able to identify any. It's pretty hard to identify any because of differences in teacher's pay." (Jan. 08) An RPC member wrote this comment on the survey: "I question whether the public in our area will vote for it because of the issues surrounding it. I fail to see any cost savings, nor do I see academic improvement. Without one or the other, why do this?" A community representative explained,

We weren't seeing the savings that we were told would result from consolidation. We were looking at minimal cost savings if any. As far as looking at the number of schools involved and how a single superintendent without at least one assistant superintendent was going to deal with this many schools. (Jan. 08)

In one RPC, there was strong opposition to the law and the mandate to consolidate. One district decided that the costs of the penalties for non-compliance with the law would be less than the anticipated increase in costs to consolidate with other districts. This district pulled out of the RPC, deciding to "go it alone," which precipitated another district pulling out to find other partners and the RPC disbanded. While we did not find this strong opposition in the other RPCs, superintendents and RPC members generally opposed the policy of mandating consolidation and a "one-size-fits all" approach. A lack of support or agreement with the law made it difficult for some people to engage in the work whole-heartedly and, in some cases, impeded consolidation planning entirely. Four of the RPCs in the study could be characterized as unwilling participants

in the process of consolidation. While many understood the state's rationale in the initiative, and felt a duty to assist with the process, there was an underlying resistance to the proposed changes. Yet the tone at the RPC meetings remained civil and purposeful. One superintendent said, "This is the most polite angry crowd I've ever seen." (Feb. 08)

In two of the five sample RPCs, general distrust among the participating districts influenced the RPC process and members' interactions. In two RPCs, members disliked the way a district participated in planning talks but later pulled out of the RPC. There was a sense of betrayal after they had put many long hours of work into the planning process with the belief that they were creating a shared educational system. In one of these RPCs, two districts had formerly been part of the same school administrative unit and had separated at two points in time. This prior history created a sense of distrust between the districts. A school board representative in one RPC shared this comment: "After the last meeting I'm starting to question whether this is a good idea to partner with [other district]. They're fine as long as they get their way, but when they don't, they pull together and out-vote us." (Feb. 08) A community representative explained the impact when one district withdrew from the RPC:

When district A unilaterally decided to file their own plan . . . it was like "Whoa! We've been trying to work together to come up with something that is good for all of us, and you guys are only interested in yourselves." It changed a number of people's minds. Some did a complete reversal. It had a serious impact on the trust level, because the general feeling was that if they're going to look out for themselves now, those who end up on the RSU board would continue to look out for themselves. (Jan. 08)

Although not a big factor, some RPC members said in the interviews that the lack of education or finance expertise among some RPC members made it difficult for the RPC to accomplish such complex tasks and decisions in the short timeframe allowed. RPCs had to identify needed data, obtain the data and explain it to members. It was a steep learning curve for

many RPC members to learn the intricacies of how their district budgets work, how the state's funding formula affects these budgets, and about the educational programs in different districts. Fiscal and legal questions arose during the RPC discussions that were often not fully answered. Some RPC members felt that the complex work should have been left to people with more expertise. One school board representative said, "It's a steep learning curve. Legalese. I'm just a mom. There is a lot of homework. . . . As a school board member, I've climbed that plateau."

(Jan. 08) A municipal representative stated,

The other thing that was wrong with this legislation was asking volunteers, amateurs, well-intentioned volunteers, on very short notice, to do what is really a very difficult process, and to do it on their own time without pay, in the evening, at the same time they're attending to their jobs and family issues. . . . To expect them to sit down and redesign the education system for the state of Maine, on their own, as amateurs, without any real background, without any pay, is just insane. (Jan. 08)

To summarize, interviewees and survey respondents indicated that the most important sources of support for the RPC planning process came from the assistance and information provided by superintendents and the RPC meeting facilitation provided by superintendents or state-trained facilitators. Other things that facilitated the planning process included: the serious attitude of RPC members to the required tasks; the RPC structure and time for RPC members to develop relationships across districts; and the template and workshops provided by Drummond and Woodsum that enumerated the required planning tasks.

The biggest challenges in the planning process centered on fiscal and governance issues, and the desire among smaller communities/ districts to maintain local control. The short timeframe specified for the planning, lack of critical information at decision points, larger context of uncertainty about the law, and belief that there would not be a net cost savings all presented serious challenges to completing required tasks on time or supporting the effort. To a

lesser extent, the lack of expertise among RPC members made it difficult for RPCs to make the complex decisions in a short timeframe. In one sample RPC, strong opposition to consolidation among smaller districts precipitated a break-down in RPC talks.

Research Question 4: What progress have school districts and RPCs made on consolidation tasks to date?

The primary data source for evaluating progress on consolidation tasks were the consolidation plans filed by districts and RPCs in December 2007. Revised plans were filed again at the end of March 2008, but not all RPCs submitted plans at that time. The MDOE's March deadline posed a serious dilemma for RPCs that were waiting for the legislative amendment to be finalized before they submitted their revised plans. The amendment adopted April 18, 2008 allowed for more flexibility and options than the original consolidation law. After learning of the new options, RPCs began to reconsider their plans in late April and May. The plans filed in March 2008 do not reflect more recent RPC decisions about partners, governance, cost sharing and other elements. This report focuses on data from the December plans but does present an update on progress for the sample RPCs as of March.

We analyzed progress indicated in the plans for the five sample RPCs and for districts statewide from a dataset obtained from the MDOE. The pattern of progress indicated by the sample RPCs in their December 2007 plans is quite consistent with that of districts across the state. The chief challenges and obstacles are largely the same, statewide.

Districts that were not otherwise exempt from the consolidation requirements were required to submit one RSU plan jointly with other participating districts, or an alternative plan, to the MDOE by December 1, 2007 using a multi-page template that included: a coversheet for superintendents' signatures for each SAU; a two-page checklist to indicate the level of

completion on 13 required elements of the plan and other parameters and whether the plan required an exception to the 2,500 minimum enrollment requirement; a page for districts to describe barriers in forming the plan and requests for specific kinds of assistance; and additional pages for more detail on each of the required elements of the plan.

Among the five sample RPCs, four RPCs submitted their plans by December 1 that included a decision about district partners to be included in the RSU. RPC E disbanded prior to December, so the districts were not able to file a plan jointly. One of the districts did submit its own plan including its eight communities. For the four sample RPCs that did designate other SAU partners in their plans, all four indicated in their December plans that decisions about governance were “complete,” but indicated decisions on other required elements were either “in progress” or “not yet started” (see Appendix F). All four RPCs had not completed their estimate of cost savings that would result from consolidation, and three RPCs had not made decisions on local school committees, documented the public meetings to prepare the plan, nor decided how they would proceed if one or more of the districts did not approve the plan in referenda. Two RPCs had not decided on disposition of real or personal school property, personnel contracts, and developing a transition plan. All four RPCs indicated that their RSU plans met the 2,500 minimum enrollment requirement and included comprehensive programming for K-12. Three RPCs indicated there would be no displacement of teachers or students or school closures in the year immediately prior to consolidation.

In sum, four of the five sample RPCs filed reorganization plans consisting of more than one SAU in December. Of these four, two RPCs indicated they had completed most (22 or 23) of the 30 required items on the two-page checklist in December 2007, while one RPC completed about half (17), and one RPC completed about a third (nine) of the items. The chief stumbling

blocks indicated on the plans were: decisions on whether or not to allow local school committees and what powers and duties to delegate to them; estimates of cost savings; how they would proceed if voters rejected the plans; and personnel contracts, which were all mentioned as major challenges in the interviews. Two of the RPCs indicated that estimating cost savings was a barrier and one RPC requested assistance on this. Another RPC requested legal support. The formal plans submitted by these four sample RPCs were largely consistent with the interview findings, while some of the elements checked off as “complete” on the December plan were still a source of debate and revision within the RPC discussions as per the interviews in December through February.

By the end of March 2008, two of the five sample RPCs had filed revised plans that showed some additional progress in completing tasks since the December filing. RPC B indicated that decisions on existing debts and lease purchase agreements were “complete”, while RPC B and RPC A indicated that they had completed documenting public meetings, estimating cost savings, and “other matters”. RPC B and RPC A indicated they had completed all or most of the elements of their plans, while RPC A still had to make decisions about local school committees (see Appendix F).

Statewide, all but one of the 290 school administrative units (SAUs) submitted some type of plan or letter to the MDOE by December 7, 2007. One unit refused to submit a plan. The submissions represented 46 reorganization plans and 31 alternative plans. In terms of enrollment, 30 plans met the 2,500 minimum enrollment requirement, while 32 plans had between 1,200 and 2,499 students, and 13 plans had fewer than 1,200 students. It should be noted that some plans did not meet the minimum enrollment required because districts had not yet finalized decisions about RSU partnership by December 1. Also, the numbers cited here do not include the

alternative plans submitted by units that were exempt from the consolidation requirements, including island school systems and Native American tribal systems (MDOE, 2007)².

The level of progress and chief obstacles indicated by four of the sample RPCs that submitted joint plans mirrors the status of other RSU plans statewide. Of the 46 reorganization plans submitted in December, seven plans included only one district and did not meet the enrollment requirement. The remaining 39 reorganization plans included two or more districts and did not request an exception to the requirements of the law. Of these 39 proposed RSUs, 90% had at least one publicly supported high school as required by the law, and 83% met the 2,500 minimum enrollment requirement (see Appendix G). A smaller percentage indicated decisions were “complete” on other key elements such as governance (40%), disposition of property (23%), personnel contracts (20%), and local school committees (5%), and estimates of cost savings (3%). Eleven of these RSU plans indicated that estimating cost savings is a challenge and seven RSU plans included requests for assistance on this.

In our observation of RPC meetings and interviews with the five sample RPCs, we found that some of the RPCs with a larger number of participating districts and RPC members tended to have more difficulty resolving issues of governance, local school committees, and cost sharing. Therefore, we examined the statewide data from the December 2007 reorganization plans to see if the level of completion on the required elements differed by the number of school administrative units within the proposed RSU, total enrollment for the RSU, or the geographic size (number of square miles) encompassed by the RSU (see Appendix G).

While we found no clear relationship between total RSU enrollment and the number or percentage of tasks completed on plans, we did find a relationship between the number of SAUs in a proposed RSU and completion of certain types of tasks, and between geographic size and

completion of tasks. When we sorted the RSU plans into three categories by configuration (two SAUs, three to six SAUs, and more than six SAUs), we found RSUs with fewer SAUs had a higher percentage of completion for tasks on governance, disposition of property and lease/purchase agreements, bargaining agreements, and transition plans. When we sorted the RSU plans into three categories by geographic size (under 150, 150-299, and 300 or more square miles), we found that RSUs encompassing fewer square miles had a higher percentage of completion for tasks on governance, bargaining agreements and personnel contracts. There was no clear pattern by number of SAUs in the proposed RSU or by geographic size and the level of completion on decisions about local school committees, disposition of debt, and estimating cost savings. As with the five sample RPCs, these areas presented challenges for most RPCs statewide, regardless of size.

In summary, both the sample RPCs and RPCs statewide made more progress by the December 1 deadline in choosing partners for the proposed RSU and making some decisions about the governance structure and composition and voting procedures for the RSU school board than on other elements of the RSU plan. They made less progress on decisions related to whether or not local school committees should be allowed and what powers and duties they should hold, cost sharing, debt sharing, disposition of property, personnel contracts, and estimates of potential cost savings resulting from consolidation. RPCs had more difficulty resolving these complex issues, in part because they are inherently more contentious, and because of the lack of critical financial information to support decision-making. They also realized that the state legislature was in the process of addressing these issues and therefore made a practical decision to wait on some issues until the state finished the legislative revisions. Two of the five sample RPCs

continued to make progress on some elements of their plans by the end of March 2008, while other RPCs chose to wait until the legislative amendment was finalized.

Research Question 5: What perceptions do RPC members and superintendents hold about the consolidation law, the planning process, and potential impacts of consolidation?

This study seeks to understand public perceptions and expectations related to school district consolidation in Maine, and to track changes in perceptions and expectations over time as the early stage of planning unfolds this year. To date, we have collected and analyzed survey, interview and observation data and documents during the initial six months of RPC planning. A second round of interviews and surveys is currently underway in May 2008, to explore any change in participants' views. This paper reports findings from the first round of interviews and surveys, while findings from the second round of interviews and surveys will be reported separately. In this section, we present findings from the fall survey and interviews regarding perceptions about the consolidation law and potential impacts of consolidation. Findings related to perceptions about the planning process were presented in an earlier section of this paper.

Perceptions about the Consolidation Law. In the first round of interviews, RPC members and superintendents were asked to describe their perceptions about why the state is requiring school district consolidation. A majority of interviewees emphasized the state's goal of reducing state expenditures for education, while some interviewees also mentioned the idea that the state may be seeking stronger state control over education. Perceptions around each of these goals are described below.

Interviewees shared the view that the state government (i.e., the governor and legislature) is seeking to reduce the state's expenditures for education, and some interviewees mentioned the goal to reduce school district administrative costs specifically. One school board member said,

“It’s a money-saving move by Augusta.” (Jan. 08) A superintendent explained, “They call it ‘reorganization’, but I think ‘consolidation’ is a better word for it. It’s an attempt to reduce or slow the growth of expenditures, particularly system administration expenditures. And this is a nation-wide trend.” (Dec. 07) Most interviewees acknowledged the on-going state budget crisis in Maine, and the practical need to reduce costs. Some interviewees commented that Maine can no longer afford to support the many, very small schools as we have done in the past. A municipal representative and a superintendent made the following comments:

The governor has a serious budget problem. The state budget is in crisis. There’s no question we’re spending too much on school administration. He was looking for places to save money, and education is a huge piece of the state budget, and every town budget. (Jan. 08)

The major issue is the politics of the 55%. [From the state’s perspective:] “How do we lower expenditure levels to be able to meet this 55%, so we don’t have to increase the money we’re providing the schools?” (Jan. 08)

Other interviewees suspected that the state is seeking to shift the burden of education costs to the local level, and some interviewees suspected the motivation for the law was more about closing small schools and eliminating school unions than merely reducing district administrative costs. A superintendent stated,

I think the real goal of this is political. Baldacci is trying to find ways to make his budget work and the goal of the process, there’s no doubt in my mind, is to shift more of the cost of education on to the local communities and off the back of the state. (Jan. 08)

Some interviewees felt the governor was using this initiative in his final term in office to create his own “legacy” of moving Maine school systems into a more efficient organization. A community representative commented, “Baldacci has a legacy he needs to fill out.” (Jan. 08) A municipal representative said, “He’s trying to leave a legacy and push it through too fast.” (Jan. 08)

A second motivation for consolidating districts mentioned by some interviewees is the idea of obtaining stronger central control over education with fewer units and budgets for the MDOE to oversee. A school board representative said, "I'm convinced that the state wants more control over running school districts. They want fewer districts." (Feb 08) A superintendent commented,

The real issue is the state wants to have more control over schools, and it's a money issue. The state provides a lot of money, so they have controlled curriculum, assessment, and not input to local units. They have trouble controlling 152 superintendents. If they go to 80, then the state can have better control. (Dec. 07)

In unprompted comments, RPC members and superintendents also shared their general views about the idea of district consolidation and the approach taken by state policymakers. These views are described in the following paragraphs. While there was little enthusiasm for consolidation, most interviewees generally agreed with the idea of seeking greater fiscal efficiency in education. Superintendents and RPC members described specific ways their districts have been collaborating with other districts on shared services, programs, and purchasing in recent years. In fact, some of the collaboration is with neighboring districts outside the proposed RSU, as well as within the RSU. Interviewees asserted that these kinds of efforts would continue and expand whether or not consolidation takes place.

Some support for the idea of consolidation was found across all five sample RPCs, and across all three RPC member constituent groups (community, municipal, and school district), as well as among some superintendents of small districts. On the survey, 64% of the RPC member respondents agreed with the statement: *The superintendent from my community is supportive of school district reorganization.* Positive views on consolidation are reflected in the following two comments from two superintendents and the last comment from a school board representative:

Our district felt that even though we saw some flaws in the law, we thought it made sense, and we said “Let’s do it to the best of our ability.” We had an obligation to do this to protect scarce resources for instructional purposes. (Dec. 07)

Eliminating jobs like mine is a good thing. I work one and a half days per week. But it could be done by the union superintendent just as easily. Those kinds of consolidation make sense and the SADs created by the Sinclair Law was a good thing. (Dec. 07)

I’m very much in favor of consolidation. I’m not happy with the way the governor went about it. I don’t think they thought enough about it before they started the process, but I think that for Maine schools to survive and for tax payers to survive in this state we need to consolidate. We don’t have that kind of money to keep these schools going to be quite honest. (Jan. 08)

Others did not support formal consolidation, but said they prefer other arrangements such as service centers or collaboratives. The strongest opposition to consolidation was found among small districts in one RPC that ultimately disbanded. RPC members in these districts feared the loss of local control and higher costs if they joined the RSU. A community representative and a school board representative commented, “There’s no positive enthusiasm for consolidation coming from anywhere. Most are happy with the ways things are.” (Jan. 08) and, “It seemed pretty heavy handed by Augusta to make this happen and there is no sense out in the field that it is a good idea.” (Jan. 08) A superintendent and a community representative each observed that consolidation may be more difficult in less populated regions of the state: “Maine is not a state where one size fits all. Geographically it’s very difficult to consolidate. . . . People are very reticent to send their younger kids to schools outside their community.” (Dec. 07) and, “It is a good thing for many communities. The problem rests more in Northern Maine than Southern Maine. It is not a good idea for some communities to consolidate. It is killing an ant with a shotgun.” (Jan. 08)

Whatever the view about consolidation, pro or con, interviewees agreed on one point—they strongly disliked the way that the governor had pursued the consolidation law, and many felt that the policy approach had generally antagonized the public and needlessly caused the loss of public trust in state government and support for this initiative. Broadly, interviewees believed that the development and adoption of the law was too rushed, that legislators did not fully understand the implications of the law when they were compelled to sign a consolidation bill that was part of the governor’s budget proposal, and that state policymakers did not seek enough input from the public and educators in developing strategies to reduce education spending. RPC members also felt that the law and implementation guidelines put too much emphasis on fiscal goals and not enough on educational goals. In referring to the rushed adoption of the law, a school board representative and a municipal representative observed, “They went into this too quickly and didn’t think about all the ramifications. That’s what we’re facing now.” (Jan. 08) and, “There should have been more involvement from lower levels. It was crammed down our throats.” (Jan. 08) Two superintendents commented on the Governor’s strategy of placing the consolidation initiative within a budget bill: “It [the law] was rushed. It was put through as an emergency bill and tied to the budget. . . . We had representatives voting on a landmark bill that had no understanding of what they were voting on!” (Dec. 07) and,

The governor, he worked so hard to get the law passed. Putting it in the budget was politically brilliant in one way of looking at it. It was almost impossible for a legislator to oppose the law, because the last thing the legislature wanted was a shutdown of state government. Maine did that once, and local legislators just got hammered for it. (Dec. 07)

Superintendents and RPC members generally disliked the policy approach of mandating consolidation and including penalties for non-compliance. They said these elements of the law greatly reduced support for the initiative. Some interviewees said that this law is just one of

many recent state or federal mandates, and that they resent being told what to do. They felt a better approach would be to provide incentives to encourage voluntary collaborations and mergers, much as the Sinclair Act had done before. The following are representative comments:

I think the state has squandered an opportunity by the way they handled this thing. . . . You really have to start in the trenches with this sort of thing. (Jan. 08)

I think consolidation is a good idea. The problem is in the presentation by the state to the municipalities. “This is what you’re going to do.” Instead of asking for input, “How can we accomplish this?” Once you start telling municipalities what to do, you have a fight on your hands. (Jan. 08)

We could have achieved real savings if we had promoted the idea of service centers instead of consolidation. (Jan. 08)

The most negative thing is that people resent having this forced upon them. . . . Put incentives out there to do it instead of putting penalties out there if you don’t do it. (Jan. 08)

I still fail to understand why the state wouldn’t have looked at a more incentive-based system, as was the case under the Sinclair Act. I think much of what may be accomplished could have been accomplished in a much more positive vein, and could have been much more successful. (Dec. 07)

Superintendents said they felt the law disenfranchised superintendents as a group, and that they have knowledge and experience that should have been part of the process of policy formation and implementation. The law did not create a formal role for superintendents in the planning process, but it was clear that the RPC deliberations would require much time and effort on the part of superintendents. Superintendents were also disappointed by comments the governor had made while proposing his initiative about the need to reduce the number of superintendents in the state, and felt that some comments were disparaging. One superintendent said, “The governor has done a lot of damage to the office of the superintendent. He created the superintendent as a boogeyman.” (Jan. 08) Another superintendent voiced his disappointment more strongly:

Superintendents were extremely disenfranchised from the start. Because of the comments of the governor. He was extremely demeaning. He showed a great deal of a lack of respect for the position of the superintendent. He portrayed superintendents as being under-worked and overpaid. (Dec. 07)

In addition to the perception that the formation of the law and implementation schedule were too rushed, some interviewees pointed out that the law really proposes more than just a structural or organizational change for school systems. It asks the public to accept a cultural shift from the traditional community schools and school boards to a regionalized approach. Such a shift would require significant change in how people view the delivery of education and the need for cooperation among neighboring communities. Changing long-held values and beliefs takes time, and is not likely to be accomplished in the six months allowed for RSU plans to be developed, or even a year or two. Without first obtaining broad agreement on the problem and best solutions, support for implementing the law with its current requirements and deadlines remains very weak. One superintendent described how the push for quick implementation ignores what is generally known about the time needed for any substantial change process:

At the state level, changing the law was a technical change. . . . The reality is that technical change is the easy part of the work. It's cultural change where the difficulty comes. The way the law has been structured in terms of the timeline, and the dramatic changes that it's asking for these communities to make, it didn't take into consideration the amount of work it takes to make cultural changes. The entire change process was ignored. (Dec. 07)

RPC members from across the five sample RPCs expressed concern that the law, statements made by state policymakers, and the template specifying required elements for the reorganization plans have focused primarily on the goal to reduce education expenses, and have not placed enough attention on how consolidation could improve educational quality and equity. They would like more of a balanced focus on both fiscal and educational goals in the discussion and decisions that are made about district reorganization. Three of the five sample RPCs created

subcommittees on educational programming. A municipal representative explained, “We added on the educational programming subcommittee. It wasn’t part of the law, but we thought it was important.” (Jan. 08) Two community representatives shared comments on the lack of an education focus in the law and implementation guidelines:

If you go back and research the legislative discussions and the initial proposal from the Governor, nothing, nothing was said in any of that about what this is going to do to improve the quality of education for kids. (Jan. 08)

We need an educator’s perspective, but one that is grounded in reality. It would be nice if your group would tackle the education issue to be something more than the Drummond and Woodsum template that focuses on financials and governance. (Jan. 08)

Thus, while many interviewees expressed agreement with the goal of finding efficiencies in education and reducing administrative costs, there was disagreement about whether or not consolidation would be the best means to achieve lower education costs. Whether or not interviewees supported the idea of consolidation, they shared a strong dislike for the state’s approach in addressing the fiscal problems. Specifically, interviewees resented the mandate, penalties, and a “one-size-fits-all” approach. Further, many interviewees felt the focus on fiscal efficiency had eclipsed the core issues of educational improvement for students, and some RPC groups were attempting to give attention to educational goals in their planning work.

Perceptions and Expectations for Positive Impacts. The survey and interviews included questions asking participants about their expectations for both positive and negative outcomes of district consolidation. Regardless of their views about the consolidation law, many interviewees described a variety of positive impacts for improved educational programs and opportunity for students that could result from district consolidation. To a lesser extent, interviewees said there may be financial savings for some education costs but perhaps no net savings in the overall local education budget. As described earlier, RPC members also described positive impacts of the

RPC planning process in supporting stronger relationships across districts, which they felt would help serve as a foundation for future collaborative efforts or consolidation. These perceptions are described more fully here.

Many of the superintendents and RPC members said they felt consolidation would improve the breadth and quality of educational programs in schools within their RSU. In the RPC meetings and in the interviews, they described how programs could be shared or spread across schools in the RSU, providing greater educational opportunity for students and equity across the communities within the RSU. Some ideas that surfaced included adding courses to schools, sharing foreign language or AP courses across high schools in the RSU using ATM or ITV technology, and allowing different high schools in the RSU to specialize in their curriculum. In addition to increasing the academic offerings, interviewees felt that extra-curricular and co-curricular opportunities could be improved, while the RPC member survey respondents indicated more uncertainty about this potential outcome. Interviewees said that students could have a broader range of sports programs to choose from if the RSU included more than one high schools. A community representative said, “It’s good for our town. It will infuse 200 kids into the high school. We can offer more programs, like AP [courses]. The economies are going to come when we combine programs.” (Jan. 08) A school board representative commented,

We were looking forward to working together with the other high school. We have some programs they don’t have. Nobody’s mentioning kids, but that’s the underlying thing in this whole thing is kids. We felt we could offer so many more programs by having some in the other high school and some in our high school. (Jan. 08)

Some RPC members said in the interviews that they felt the quality of educational programs could improve as a result of consolidation, while RPC members indicated more uncertainty about this on the survey. Interviewees said that stronger academic programs among

some districts and schools would encourage other districts and schools in the RSU to upgrade their programs. Interviewees said that the RSU could use some cost savings from bulk purchasing of texts to purchase better quality textbooks and materials, and by sharing resources could also obtain better professional development for teachers. Some RPC members said shared special education services could improve the range and quality of services that they are able to offer special needs students. Superintendents and RPC members felt there would be greater consistency in the delivery of education and assessment as a result of consolidation. On the survey, 63% of the RPC member respondents indicated it was likely/ very likely that *curriculum across schools in the RSU will be more similar* within five years as a result of consolidation.

Comments on potential benefits for educational quality included the following:

We'll be able to order better quality textbooks, materials, because of the cost savings from shared purchasing. We'll be able to expand the opportunities for kids. One high school might focus on certain areas, like the arts. (Jan. 08)

If it goes through, the opportunities for students will be better. The opportunities for faculty and staff in terms of staff development will be better, too. (Jan. 08)

You put the two districts together and there's bound to be an interaction between those levels of teachers that will benefit both districts in terms of moving forward in the area of standards-based education. (Jan. 08)

We could combine resources for special ed and have a common facility, where kids could get appropriate care, which they don't have now. (Jan. 08)

Superintendents and RPC members expressed the expectation that the state would save some money and that there could be some savings in certain areas of the local education budget, but they were dubious about seeing any net cost savings at the local level for the next several years. Some RPC members said they were surprised to find that many of their neighboring districts already used the same curricula and textbook series. Interviewees stated that shared purchasing could result in savings. On the survey, 72% of the RPC member respondents

indicated it was likely/very likely that *collaborative purchasing agreements will increase* within five years as a result of consolidation. Interviewees also said that shared programs could reduce personnel costs. For example, part time art or music teachers could be shared and some curriculum coordinator or other positions could be eliminated. Shared transportation, food, technology, and special education services were also ideas that surfaced as potential areas for cost savings and areas where some districts already collaborate. A municipal representative said, “We would absolutely see some benefit in the cost of transportation.” (Jan. 08) While interviewees saw opportunity to save costs in some areas, they generally anticipated higher net costs as a result of consolidation, particularly over the first few years. A superintendent stated, “The way the law is structured right now, the potential savings will be overridden by the additional cost. The shifting of money.” (Dec. 07) A community representative offered,

My professional opinion is where we’re going to see cost savings is probably 8-10 years down the road, with the closing of small schools and the elimination of teachers’ positions. That’s where the largest majority of costs are in education. (Jan. 08)

In addition to the positive educational and fiscal impacts cited by interviewees, RPC members said that the RPC discussions had already had the positive impact of fostering better understanding and relationships among members across districts. They felt the knowledge and ties forged in the planning process could carryover and strengthen the working relationships of RSU board members and the communities within the RSU. On the other hand, as described earlier in the description of challenges, some RPC members felt that the controversial issues raised in the RPC process had fostered more distrust and division among the participating districts, and they feared that the RSU might not come to fruition. The two comments below illustrate how deliberations within RPCs have encouraged a shift in perspective, from the local to the regional, and increased the desire for more regional collaboration:

On a small level, I have gotten to know civic leaders of [other two districts]. This is forcing me to consider that the boundaries of this town are arbitrary. I'm starting to realize I was an isolationist. I can appreciate that there are really good people in [other two districts]. There are communities that have not talked to each other. It's making the state a little smaller. (Jan. 08)

I think relationships are being established, new and old, being reinforced through the process. Even if something happens and the RSU doesn't come together, I think we will seek opportunities to work together, collaborate, and take advantage of each other's strengths. (Jan. 08)

Results from the RPC Member Survey were disaggregated to see if there were any significant differences between different groups of respondents. Statistically significant differences ($p < .05$) were found for some survey items when we compared responses for different groups of respondents.

On several items, RPC members in the over 50 age group indicated more positive expectations than did members in the 50 or under age group for certain educational, financial, and other outcomes of district consolidation (see Appendix E). The over 50 age group comprised 71% of the survey respondents, compared to 29% in the 50 or under age group.

In comparing responses across the three constituent groups, RPC members representing municipal government indicated slightly more positive expectations than did members representing school boards or the general public for certain types of outcomes of district consolidation (see Appendix E). However, the differences were statistically significant ($p < .05$) for only one item related to educational outcomes (*All students in Maine will have equal access to educational programs that will support achievement of the Learning Results*), and one item related to social outcomes (*Community members will feel less connected to their schools than they do today*). The percentage of respondents to this survey from each of the three constituent groups was roughly equal—close to 30% (see Appendix E).

Across the five sample RPC groups there are large differences in the mean response for certain items that appear to be significant. These differences reflect the particular concerns emphasized by the different RPCs in the interviews. For example, expectations about the likelihood of education budgets growing at predictable rates, small schools being closed, continuance of school choice, and the likelihood that the state would fund a new school in the proposed RSU varied according to each RPC's local circumstances and specific concerns. On other items, the differences are smaller (see Appendix E).

Perceptions and Expectations for Negative Impacts. Although many interviewees mentioned some positive impacts that might result from district consolidation, they emphasized even more their expectation of negative impacts. The primary concern centered on possible increases in local education costs. Other concerns were related to the expected loss of local control and diminishing school-community relationships, and the difficulty of administering a system that covers a larger geographic area. In two of the sample RPCs, there was concern about negative educational impacts if dissimilar systems merge.

While the survey and interviews indicated some expectation for cost savings at the state level and for certain areas of the local education budget, survey respondents and interviewees generally indicated that they expected no net savings in their local education budget, and possibly even an increase in local education costs and tax rates. Interviewees cited the differences in teacher salary and benefits across districts in the proposed RSU that will disappear when contracts are renegotiated by the RSU, differences in debt levels due to school construction projects, and the law's requirement to honor existing superintendent contracts until they expire—even after the creation of the RSU. The law's requirements to share costs and debt are expected to shift costs from some communities or districts in the RSU to others. In addition, interviewees

were dubious about the possibility of cost savings when more administrative and clerical personnel would be needed in the central office. Thus, most interviewees expected either no net cost savings or an increase in local education costs. A few interviewees said there may be cost savings in a few years, after the current superintendent contracts expire and some small schools are closed eliminating some teaching positions. Representative comments from interviewees include the following:

On paper I'm sure it seemed logical that this would save money. They have to be realizing by now that this won't happen – at least for several years, if then. (Feb. 08)

The big issue is really: “Are there any cost savings?” So far we haven't been able to identify any. It's pretty hard to identify any because of differences in teachers' pay. (Jan. 08)

If your viewpoint is that you're going to save 35 million dollars by consolidating superintendents, then all the money is going to be spent elsewhere. In teachers' contracts, there's a huge difference . . . but that's only going to make the budget go up. (Jan. 08)

It can't save money for at least the next few years. We have two superintendents' contracts we have to honor. (Jan. 08)

I think we've all accepted the fact that there will be no savings, and there will probably be an increase. So, how are we going to manage this increase, which for some communities will be substantial? (Jan. 08)

On the survey, 91% of RPC member respondents indicated they believe it is likely/ very likely that the *cost of teacher salaries in the RSU will have increased*, 64% indicated the belief that *transportation costs will increase*, and 82% indicated the belief that *property taxes to support education in my community will have increased* within five years of district consolidation. Almost 70% of the respondents indicated the belief that it is unlikely/ highly unlikely that the *cost of administering education in the region will have decreased*, and that *tax*

rates for education will be more uniform across Maine communities within five years of district consolidation.

The survey and interview findings also indicate a strong concern about negative impacts for local control. Concerns about loss of community influence in local education decisions were apparent in four of the five sample RPCs. In particular, superintendents and RPC members from smaller communities and districts expressed strong concern about having less influence in RSU school board decisions, as smaller communities will have fewer members on the board and lower weighted votes. With respect to governance, a community representative explained, “We fear we would be encompassed by [a larger district] and we would have very little say.” (Jan. 08) A municipal representative said, “Loss of control is a big issue. Not only for taxes, but for quality of education.” (Jan. 08) And a school board representative stated, “We realized that effectively we’d have to hand over the keys and control to our K-8 schools. That was an area of great concern.” (Jan. 08) On the survey, 68% of RPC member respondents indicated their belief that it is unlikely/ highly unlikely that *my community will have control over budget decisions for the schools in my community* after district consolidation.

Survey respondents and interviewees also expressed the expectation that a larger school system and regional school board would create more distance in school-community relationships. Each community would have fewer local residents on the RSU board, and many parents would need to drive longer distances to attend RSU board meetings. Interviewees said that a regional school board and central office would not be able to maintain intimate knowledge of each school system--their teachers, students, programs, and parents’ priorities. Some feared that parents may become more apathetic in their involvement with their schools, and that the RSU board may vote to eliminate programs or close small schools that are highly valued in the community. Concerns

about creating a larger bureaucracy and more distance in the school-community relationships existed in four of the five sample RPCs. In three of the sample RPCs, possible closure of small schools was a concern. On the survey, 63% of RPC member respondents indicated their belief that it is likely/ very likely that *community members will feel less connected to their schools than they do today* within five years of district consolidation. Some representative comments from the interviews were:

The intimate relationship that the community has with the school system will be lost. (Jan. 08)

I fear that the school district will get so big that school people won't know the names of students. I'm also afraid that communities will be lost. (Jan. 08)

You'll have kids driving themselves or taking a bus from [district A] to [district B] which is about 30 miles each way. That's not a small town school community. (Jan. 08)

Budget meetings will be held in one location, which will be far away for many people to attend. People may feel disconnected, disenfranchised from local employees. There is fear that small schools will be closed. When you take schools away, what does the town have? (Feb. 08)

Superintendents and some RPC members also mentioned possible negative impacts on the role of superintendents and principals, and on the workload for central office personnel. Interviewees expressed the view that administering a larger system that covers a wider geographic area would reduce the amount of time that superintendents have to visit schools and be educational leaders in their system. Instead, interviewees felt the superintendent would need to be more of a business manager, and this would shift more responsibility to the school principals. Principals in turn would need to cope with the increased demands on their time and may not have the appropriate training for their changed role. Central office staff would have more teachers and students to keep track of, and interviewees said that additional staff would be needed to cope with the ever-expanding state and federal accountability requirements and

paperwork. A municipal representative said, “You’ll have one superintendent for 7,000 students. That work won’t get done.” (Jan. 08) A superintendent shared a similar concern: “I’m concerned about the workload. Our central office is pretty much out straight all the time.” (Jan. 08) A municipal representative said, “I think the districts are going to get too big and cumbersome. It’s going to be harder, not easier, to get things done.” (Feb. 08) A school board representative shared a concern that regional board members won’t be familiar with all the schools under their control: “As a board member, you’re not going to have as much of a mental landscape of the property [schools in the region]” (Jan. 08) A community member described the impact on the role of principals:

My concern is maybe we don’t need professional educators [as superintendents], maybe what we need is professional business people, because they’re not going to have time to be educational leaders, they’re going to be managers. This, in turn, is going to place a lot more responsibility and pressure on principals. Their training will have to change markedly. (Jan. 08)

Concerns about negative educational impacts were also expressed. On the survey, 56% of the RPC member respondents indicated that *concerns about the effects of large student enrollment* are significant/ highly significant challenges in the formation of the RSU, and 57% indicated that *concern that students’ academic achievement will decline* is a significant/ highly significant challenge. Although the majority of interviewees who described educational impacts felt these impacts would be positive, some interviewees in two of the sample RPCs expressed the fear that the lower academic quality of programs or performance in some schools or districts would have a negative impact on other schools within the RSU. This concern motivated one of the sample RPCs to create a committee on educational issues to guide the alignment of educational philosophy among participating districts. A community representative in this RPC said:

The Ed Committee will be crucial. If they say it is not in the best interest of communities at large, the agreement will be over. But I don't think that will happen. A single [high] school will be good for everyone. (Jan. 08)

A municipal representative in the other RPC described the reluctance in one community to take on low achieving students from two other communities in the proposed RSU:

If we take on [other two communities], that means that we are responsible for all the high school students in those towns who can't get into other high schools. Anyone who gets kicked out of [semi-private high school], we'll have to take. [Our community] did not want to be in a position to be the only high school that would have to accept all the behavioral issues of the district. It's hard to talk about because we're all about education here. (Jan. 08)

To summarize, the survey and interview participants indicated expectations for both positive and negative impacts of district consolidation, but emphasized the negative impacts. Among the potential positive impacts were: expectations for broader academic and athletic program opportunities for students that could improve equity across communities in the RSU; improved quality of educational programs, courses, teaching, and professional development for teachers; savings in some areas of state and local educational expenditure; and increased regional collaboration in education. Among the potential negative impacts were: increased local expense for education and tax rates; dilution of the school-community relationship; loss of local control over educational decisions; challenges in administering larger systems that cover wide geographic areas; and possible reduction in academic quality or student performance.

Discussion

The findings to date from this study indicate that RPCs have been working diligently on the tasks required by legislation to reorganize Maine school districts. The initial stages of the planning work were compressed into a very short period of time, and mostly occurred between September and December 2007. Although RPC members and superintendents have engaged in this work in a sincere way, their work has been done within the context of great uncertainty

about the ultimate benefits and impacts of consolidation for their communities and educational systems, and uncertainty about the stability of the state's initiative to consolidate districts in light of the state's education policy reversals in recent years.

Literature on education policy helps to illuminate the formation of Maine's legislative mandate to reorganize school districts and the specific policy tools that were included in that legislation. Kingdon's framework (2002) of the three policy streams that merge to allow for policy change fits with the circumstances of the recent district reorganization initiative in Maine. The problems of a severe state budget deficit, resistance to increased state taxes, and decreasing student enrollment demanded attention of state policymakers. The Governor and the state educational agency determined that a policy solution to these problems would be reduced state funding for education in general and a reduction in the number of school administrative units specifically. Through the political process of shaping the legislative initiative, the number of proposed school administrative units was revised, and deadlines and other implementation requirements were hammered out. As some RPC members commented in the interviews, if the state had not faced the problem of a severe budget crisis in January 2007, the opportunity for the Governor to propose district reorganization as a solution may not have existed.

In seeking policy change, policymakers have a variety of policy approaches and tools available including persuasion to encourage change, mandates, and different forms of pressure (such as penalties) and support (such as inducements or capacity building) (Fowler, 2004). Research on policy implementation for education reform indicates that a combination of both "top-down" mandates and "bottom-up" initiatives, along with a combination of pressure and support lead to more effective policy implementation and outcomes (Fullan in Elmore and Fuhrman, 1994).

As many states around the country have begun to pursue some form of district reorganization to deal with decreasing enrollment and limited fiscal resources, they have largely selected the use of persuasion along with some combination of inducements and negative pressures to bring about change (Plucker et al, 2007; Rural School and Community Trust, 2006). In Maine, the Sinclair Act of 1957 sought to reduce the number of school administrative units through a mandate with fiscal incentives, and was successful in significantly reducing the number of units within a short period of time (Maine Heritage Policy Center, 2007). That legislation required that consolidated units have a publicly-funded high school with a minimum enrollment, but did not specify many other requirements. The most recent legislation to consolidate school administrative districts departs from the earlier policy approach used in Maine, in that it emphasizes penalties, does not include inducements, and is highly prescriptive.

This study examined five RPCs and Reorganization Plans from RPCs statewide. The evidence to date from the five sample RPCs indicates that the state's requirement to include representatives from three constituent groups (municipal, school board, and general public) was implemented with some variation and was viewed favorably by RPC members. The selection of district partners was primarily made by superintendents and school board members prior to convening the RPCs, without substantial effort to seek public input. Although the state provided a list of potential partners, there were many changes in partner selection as districts examined many factors, such as geographic proximity, enrollment size, prior history of collaboration, and differences in district costs and debt. However, the short timeframe allowed for partner selection and lack of critical information at certain decision points made the organizational task of selecting partners difficult.

Lack of time and information were also factors that influenced the process of making decisions on elements of the Reorganization Plan. All five sample RPCs adopted a subcommittee structure, with the number of subcommittees being related to the size of the RPC membership. The subcommittees reflected the required elements of the Reorganization Plan. Three of the five sample RPCs created subcommittees to consider the impact of reorganization on students' educational programs and opportunities. Generally, decision-making within the RPCs and subcommittees was by consensus rather than formal voting. The subcommittee structure seemed to work well, in that it provided an opportunity for members of different communities to find commonalities and work through differences in educational priorities. However, some RPC members said that the subcommittee structure did not allow a sufficiently broad perspective of the reorganization effort.

Four of the five RPCs elected to use a state-trained facilitator to lead meetings. One RPC elected to have two superintendents share leadership of the meetings, as the two districts had already established close collaboration in their educational systems. Across the five sample RPCs, we found variation in both superintendents' and facilitators' leadership styles, which influenced the planning process and RPC members' perceptions about the process. In two RPCs, the facilitators were more directive in their approach and urged RPC members to move through the required tasks more quickly, while two other facilitators allowed more time for discussion not directly related to the completion of tasks. In two RPCs, interviewees expressed concern about possible facilitator bias that influenced the procedural process for decision-making on controversial governance issues. Superintendents in two of the RPCs exerted tighter control over decisions, sometimes from behind the scenes, which made some RPC members feel cut out of the decision-making process.

Within the RPC planning process, survey respondents and interviewees identified some of the key supports that facilitated the decision-making process and completion of required reorganization tasks. Superintendents were perceived as helpful resources for fiscal and legal information about districts. This information was critical for decisions about partner selection, cost sharing, debt sharing, and other elements of the plan. Superintendents and their district business managers committed many hours of work to generate the information requested by RPC subcommittees and superintendents were able to explain complex information to the many RPC members who were unfamiliar with school finance and contractual issues. Facilitators were also viewed as helpful in keeping the RPCs focused on the organizational tasks, and moderating RPC discussions that sometimes became tense when controversial issues were addressed. RPC members said the template and workshops developed by the Drummond and Woodsum law firm facilitated the planning work in that the template broke down the legislation's broad goals into specific tasks and checklists in a comprehensive booklet.

Among the major challenges identified in the surveys and interviews were the constraints of time and lack of essential information for certain decisions in the planning process. The short timeframe allowed for the development of Reorganization Plans precluded the inclusion of the broader public in the planning process, and made it difficult for full discussion within the RPC and resolution of differences on some decisions on governance and cost sharing. Further, information on projected state funding was not made available to RPCs by the state until late in the RPC planning process. Districts attempted to estimate the fiscal impact of different district configurations, but the data used were estimates at best.

The strong value placed on local control in some communities in Maine also presented a challenge that impeded decisions on governance and cost sharing in particular. Some RPC

members were focused on protecting local control for their community, and were reluctant to embrace a regional governance structure. One of the five sample RPCs disbanded due to these issues, and some of the other RPCs continue to grapple with the more difficult decisions. For three of the five sample RPCs, the desire to maintain high school choice was a sticking point. One RPC worked out an agreement for all students in the RSU to attend one high school over time, but RPC members were not certain if voters would approve this.

Another significant challenge was uncertainty about the stability of the reorganization initiative. RPC members recalled the recent history of some state mandates in education that were later rescinded after much effort had been made to implement the policies at the local level. For example, the state required districts to develop comprehensive local assessment systems in 2003 and then subsequently rescinded this requirement. Another policy change was dropping the requirement for the Maine Education Assessment for high school students and adopting the SAT in 2006. This context of sudden policy shifts may have undermined the public's faith in the state's leadership of education. Further, it became clear during the RPC planning process that efforts were underway to either repeal or amend the legislation.

The challenges of time, lack of information, and traditional values around local control of education all suggest factors that may not have been fully considered in the development of the school district reorganization policy. Kingdon (2002) suggests that in order for policy proposals to survive, they must be both technically feasible and be viewed as acceptable within currently held public values and priorities. Technical feasibility means that policies are well thought out, researched, and that most knowable outcomes are predictable. While the initial policy for school district reorganization may not have met these criteria for policy survival, the current effort to amend the law and adjust the timeline and specific requirements may have the impact of

increasing both the technical feasibility of the law and compatibility of the law with public values around education.

Analysis of the Reorganization Plans submitted by RPCs statewide to the Maine Department of Education in December 2007 indicates that RPCs made more progress on decisions about district partner selection and some areas of governance such as the size, composition, and apportionment of votes for the proposed RSU school board. Less progress was made on decisions about cost sharing, debt sharing, disposition of property, personnel contracts, estimation of potential cost savings, and whether or not local school committees would be allowed. Areas of contention within the RPC often involved a reluctance to give up local control or the expectation that consolidation would result in a shifting of costs to some communities in the RSU. The lack of reliable financial projections to inform decisions also impeded progress on many decisions related to finance. RPCs consisting of fewer administrative units made more progress on many of the required planning tasks than RPCs with a larger number of administrative units.

Although superintendents and RPC members sometimes expressed contrasting views about district consolidation, the current law, the planning process, and potential impacts of consolidation, there were some consistent trends and predominant themes across the five sample RPCs. Most interviewees expressed agreement with the goal of increasing fiscal efficiency in education, and recognized that the state must make decisions within the constraints of a severe state budget shortfall and a high intolerance for increased taxes among Maine citizens. Yet, there was strong disagreement that district consolidation is the best or only solution to the state's fiscal woes. Many of the interviewees described efforts their districts have already made to share services, purchasing, or personnel with other districts and they said these collaborative efforts would continue whether or not the state requires collaboration. Further, interviewees expressed

strong resentment that state policymakers chose to pursue a policy mandate with penalties, rather than encouraging collaboration and consolidation through incentives as had been done earlier with the Sinclair Act. They said that this approach reduced support for the initiative and encouraged more active resistance of the law. One of the five sample RPCs disbanded after one district decided they would pay the penalties rather than incur the additional costs to consolidate.

While superintendents and RPC members expressed expectations for both positive and negative impacts of district consolidation, they largely emphasized the potential negative impacts. Among the expected positive impacts were increased educational opportunities and equity for students within the RSU, improved professional development for teachers, and stronger, collaborative relationships among neighboring districts. Among the expected negative impacts were increased local costs for education, a reduction of local control over education, challenges in administering a larger regional system, and a dilution of school-community relationships. RPC members in smaller communities expressed more concern about the potential for increased costs and a reduction in their influence over school board decisions. Respondents expected cost savings for the state, but were dubious that there would be any net reduction in local education expenses. Some interviewees said that savings might be obtained in a few years, after existing superintendents' contracts expire and some of the small schools in the RSU were closed.

The current study is limited by the small survey and interview samples derived from five RPCs. While we attempted to select RPCs that varied on several important demographic characteristics, the sample does not include all possible configurations of RPCs or districts statewide, nor the RPCs in far northern Maine, island districts, and Native American tribal districts. Another limitation is the element of self-selection in the survey and interviews, which may introduce some bias in responses. We randomly selected RPC members to invite them to

participate in the interview, and we invited all RPC members to participate in the survey. Some agreed and some did not respond to the invitation or second round of invitations. Thus, we do not know if the views of non-participants differ in any meaningful way from the views expressed by participants. Finally, this paper presents the findings from one round of data collection. A second round of data collection is underway for spring 2008, to allow for the researchers to examine changes in views over time.

Conclusions

The early findings of this study suggest that Maine's school district reorganization policy initiative is progressing as the law requires. The MDOE has provided a structure and resources, including a model for SAUs to form Regional Planning Committees (RPCs) and develop Reorganization Plans, deadlines, and modest funds for expenses related to RPC functions. State-trained facilitators and superintendents are serving as resources to RPCs by providing information and guiding the processes. Most SAUs and RPCs submitted Reorganization Plans by the December 1 deadline, though many of these were incomplete. Some RPCs continued to work on completing their plans and showed more progress by the March 28 deadline, while other RPCs chose to wait until the legislative amendment was finalized and discontinued their meetings for a three or four month period.

While there is compliance with the law and general agreement that more efficient ways of delivering high quality education programs can and should be found, the early findings of this study provide evidence that full support for reorganization is lacking in much of the education community. This lack of support appears to be related to several factors. Additional research is needed to validate these findings beyond the limited sample of this study. The findings from this research suggest that the lack of support for school district reorganization is rooted in four

fundamental problems: 1) pressure from time constraints and mandates; 2) lack of confidence in the stability of the initiative; 3) lack of credibility of primary goals; and 4) threats to local values around governance and school choice.

Pressure from time constraints and mandates. The governor announced the school reorganization initiative in January, 2007. While decreasing enrollment and increased costs had encouraged more collaboration and sharing of resources among school districts in recent years, the governor's initiative was a surprise to the education community. Despite significant pushback and many unanswered questions about the details of the policy, the governor signed the legislation into law in June. Continuing the rapid pace, during the summer months, the MDOE implemented an ambitious statewide information program to explain the requirements of the law and the penalties for not complying, and to provide guidelines to assist local communities to begin the process. SAUs were expected to form RPCs, solicit public input and make decisions about partnerships by August 31. Reorganization Plans were required to be submitted to the MDOE by December 1. Little time was dedicated to building the rationale and support for this initiative in the general public or education community. Few opportunities were provided for public input in most communities. These short deadlines left little time for communities to discuss critical issues and resolve differences, and further heightened existing sensitivities and resistance to top-down mandates.

Lack of confidence in the stability of the initiative. Maine's education community has experienced reversals and other significant education policy changes in the last five years including the replacement of the high school MEA with the SAT and the moratorium on Local Assessment Systems. These inconsistencies in state policy provide a foundation for many educators and RPC members to express doubts that school district reorganization will actually

occur. The large number of bills filed with the legislature in January 2008 seeking to amend the reorganization law and a citizens' initiative to repeal the law reinforced those who shared these doubts.

Lack of credibility of primary goals. Both interview and survey data indicate that most RPC members did not believe that school district reorganization would save money, and many were skeptical that reorganization would improve the quality of education for students in their communities. RPC members lacked reliable financial information to be able to fully estimate the impact of consolidation on local education costs. Yet, they firmly believed that local education costs would increase because of the need to level teachers' salaries within the RSU, the requirement to share debt, and the potential for increased transportation costs for large geographic regions. Some RPC members indicated that while initial costs would be higher, the growth in the costs would decrease in future years as current superintendent contracts expire and small schools are closed.

The quality of education programs offered to students is another major concern of RPC members. Although survey data indicate that most believed that students would have more curricular and co-curricular options, some were skeptical that the quality of education for students in their communities would improve.

Threats to local values around governance and school choice. Maine citizens place a high value on the governance of their local schools and, in some communities, the right to send their students to any high school they chose. These values are perceived as seriously threatened by the school district reorganization initiative. Many RPC members indicated that their primary interest in being a member of the RPC was to keep their local school open or to be sure that their community would continue to have school choice.

Overall, these factors describe threats to a policy initiative that, on the surface appears to be moving forward toward implementation. RPCs are working through the details, making compromises, and developing Reorganization Plans in the context of these threats. This volunteer workforce appears dedicated to achieving quality education programs at a reasonable cost for their communities. Many RPC members expressed the view that increased collaboration and sharing of resources among districts is necessary and, in time, will slow the growth of education spending, will create greater efficiencies, and will improve educational opportunities. In contrast, other RPC members are doubtful that the school district reorganization initiative will accomplish these goals. A common view shared across RPC members broadly is a lack of confidence that once the Reorganization Plans are developed they will be approved in the required public referenda. The persistence of RPC members appears to be based on the shared belief that education in Maine can be improved and that, in the end, perhaps after the legislature acts on amendments to the law, a more efficient and effective system of education will emerge.

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Appendices

- Appendix A: Table showing data sources for the study
- Appendix B: Tables showing the number of interviews and returned surveys from the first round of data collection (Interviews from Nov. 2007 to March 2008, surveys from Nov. 2007 and Jan. 2008)
- Appendix C: Survey of RPC Members, fall 2007
- Appendix D: Interview Protocol for RPC Members, Fall 2007
- Appendix E: Data tables showing the results of the RPC Member Survey
- Appendix F: Data table showing progress on elements of reorganization plans as of Dec. 2007 and March 2008 for the five sample RPCs.
- Appendix G: Data tables showing some of the analyses of data from reorganization plans filed by districts statewide in Dec. 2007

Appendix A

Table A1. Data Sources for Study

Research Questions	Survey	Interviews	Observations	Documents	RPC Plans (state-wide)
How have school districts and RPCs organized themselves to accomplish consolidation tasks?		X	X	X	
What factors were considered and processes used in RPCs' selection of partners and decision making?	X	X	X		
What supports and challenges have RPC members and superintendents identified related to consolidation tasks?	X	X	X	X	X
What progress have school districts and RPCs made on consolidation tasks to date?		X	X	X	X
What perceptions do RPC members and superintendents hold about the consolidation law, the planning process, and potential impacts of consolidation?	X	X		X	

Note: RPC plans were obtained from the Maine Department of Education. Data on district demographics were also obtained from the MDOE for use in analysis of data related to each research question.

Appendix B

Number of interviews and returned surveys from first round of data collection

Note: Second round of data collection is currently underway, and is not reported here.

Table B1. Fall-Winter Interviews in the Five Sample RPCs

Role	RPC A	RPC B	RPC C	RPC D	RPC E
Facilitator	1	0	1	N/A	1
Superintendent	2	1	1	1	4
Municipal Rep.	2	2	1	3	1
School Board Rep.	2	4	2	1	3
Public Rep.	2	3	1	0	4
District personnel	0	0	0	1	0
Total	9	10	6	6	13

Note: RPC D did not have a facilitator. Total number interviews (n=44).

Table B2. Fall RPC Member Survey Response Rates for the Five Sample RPCs

RPC	RPC Members	Paper Responses	Online Responses	Total Responses	Response Rate
A	47	26	0	26	55%
B	27	9	1	10	37%
C	14	6	1	7	50%
D	40	18	4	22	55%
E	57	0	32	32	56%

Note: Three additional respondents did not indicate their RPC on the survey. Total # respondents (n=100).

Appendix C

Survey of RPC Members, Fall 2007

RPC code: _____

Section 1: About You

Regional Planning Committees (RPCs) consist of representatives from three groups. Which group do you represent? (check one)

____ School committee ____ Municipal government ____ General public

What town or city do you represent? _____

Your gender: Male ____ Female ____

Your age group (circle one): 20-30 31-40 41-50 51-60 61-70 71+

Do you have a child who currently attends school in the school district you represent?

____ Yes ____ No

Have you ever held a paid position in the school district you represent? ____ Yes ____ No

Have you ever volunteered in the school district you represent? ____ Yes ____ No

Section 2: Potential Outcomes of School District Reorganization

Below are statements that describe some potential outcomes of school district reorganization. Please indicate how likely you believe that each of these outcomes will become a reality within five years (1 = Highly Unlikely, 6 = Highly Likely).

Within five years, as a result of school district reorganization...

	Highly Unlikely					Highly Likely
1. All students in Maine will have equal access to educational programs that will support achievement of the Learning Results (Maine's learning standards).....	1	2	3	4	5	6
2. Tax rates for education will be more uniform across Maine communities	1	2	3	4	5	6
3. Property taxes to support education in my community will have increased.....	1	2	3	4	5	6
4. The quality of education for students in my community will have improved	1	2	3	4	5	6
5. Small schools in my community will be closed.....	1	2	3	4	5	6

	Highly Unlikely				Highly Likely	
6. School choice, for communities that currently have this option, will still exist.....	1	2	3	4	5	6
7. My community will have control of budget decisions for the schools in my community.....	1	2	3	4	5	6
8. Community members will feel less connected to their schools than they do today.....	1	2	3	4	5	6
9. Transportation costs will increase...	1	2	3	4	5	6
10. The state will fund a new school for our students.....	1	2	3	4	5	6
11. Collaborative purchasing agreements will increase.....	1	2	3	4	5	6
12. Curriculum across schools in the RSU will be more similar.....	1	2	3	4	5	6
13. Students will have more academic courses and programs from which to choose.....	1	2	3	4	5	6
14. Students will have more extra and co-curricular activities from which to choose	1	2	3	4	5	6
15. The average time students will ride a school bus will increase.....	1	2	3	4	5	6
16. The cost of administering education in the region will have decreased.....	1	2	3	4	5	6
17. Maintenance of facilities will have improved.....	1	2	3	4	5	6
18. The cost of teacher salaries in the RSU will have increased.....	1	2	3	4	5	6
19. Dollars spent for education in Maine will be used more efficiently.....	1	2	3	4	5	6
20. Education budgets will grow at predictable rates.....	1	2	3	4	5	6
21. Teachers will have received state supported, uniform training in helping students achieve the Learning Results	1	2	3	4	5	6
22. Courses and programs in schools across the state will be more similar.....	1	2	3	4	5	6

Section 3: Your Perceptions of the RPC Process

We would like to know your opinions about the RPC process in which you are involved. Please indicate the degree to which you agree or disagree with each of the following statements (1 = Strongly Disagree, 6 = Strongly Agree).

	Strongly Disagree				Strongly Agree	
23. My RPC has the information needed to make decisions about school district reorganization.....	1	2	3	4	5	6
24. Everyone on the RPC has an opportunity to share opinions at RPC meetings.....	1	2	3	4	5	6
25. I am confident that the RPC will make the best decisions for our schools even if I disagree with them	1	2	3	4	5	6
26. All members of the RPC feel their voices are heard.....	1	2	3	4	5	6
27. School committee representatives dominate the discussion.....	1	2	3	4	5	6
28. Municipal representatives dominate the discussion.....	1	2	3	4	5	6
29. General public representatives dominate the discussion.....	1	2	3	4	5	6
30. The RPC has made an adequate effort to obtain public input.....	1	2	3	4	5	6
31. The RPC has made an adequate effort to keep the public informed.....	1	2	3	4	5	6
32. The facilitator has effectively guided the process.....	1	2	3	4	5	6
33. RPC subcommittees have worked effectively.....	1	2	3	4	5	6
34. The administrators from the school district I represent have provided information as requested by the RPC	1	2	3	4	5	6
35. The superintendent from my community is supportive of school district reorganization.....	1	2	3	4	5	6
36. One or more superintendents have played a leadership role in the RPC process.....	1	2	3	4	5	6
37. Teachers' concerns about reorganization have been adequately considered by the RPC	1	2	3	4	5	6

Section 4: Potential Challenges to Forming an RSU

How significant do you believe each of the following concerns and issues have been or will be for your RPC as you work to develop a plan for an RSU (0 = Not Significant, 6 = Highly Significant).

	Not Significant						Highly Significant
38. Obtaining adequate public input	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
39. Different philosophies about education between and among communities.....	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
40. The potential for increased tax rates for education.....	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
41. Fear that small schools might be closed.....	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
42. Concern that students' academic achievement will decline.....	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
43. The potential lack of administrators' familiarity with teacher and student issues.....	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
44. Concern that academic rigor may decline.....	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
45. Concerns about the effects of large student enrollment.....	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
46. Potential loss of local control.....	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
47. Concern for increased bus time for students.....	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
48. Concern about loss of school choice in some communities.....	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
49. Concerns about cost sharing.....	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
50. Representation on the RSU board	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
51. The disposition of property.....	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
52. The authority granted to local advisory committees.....	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
53. Concerns about existing contracts, their expiration, and/or renegotiation.....	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
54. Other: _____	0	1	2	3	4	5	6

Appendix D

Interview Protocol for RPC Members, Fall 2007

Interview Code #: _____

Date of Interview: _____

Selection of Representatives

How were you selected as a representative of the general public/school committee/municipal government?

Do you have or have you had children who are students in the school district you represent?

Have you ever held a paid position in this district or volunteered? (Describe)

Selection of School District Partners

Which school districts did your community consider as partners but decide not to include as partners? Why?

What criteria were used to select certain districts as partners?

Do you believe that the selected partners are the best choice? Why/why not?

Perceptions of the RPC Process

How was the RPC chair selected? In your view, was this a fair process?

What has been the role of the facilitator?

What task(s) or subcommittees have you been working on? Were you assigned or did you select this task(s)/ subcommittee?

Are there specific roles within your subcommittee such as chair and recorder? How were these roles filled?

Do you feel that the subcommittee has all the information it needs to make decisions? (If not, describe what types of information are needed.)

Do you feel that the opinions of all members of the subcommittee are respected? Why/ why not?

How are decisions made in the subcommittee (vote/consensus)?

What decisions, if any, has the subcommittee presented to the whole RPC? What was the whole RPC response to these decisions?

Has the RPC process resulted in a complete RSU plan by December 1? If not, how long will it take to complete the work of the RPC?

What are the major decisions left to be made?

Perceptions of Challenges

What issues or concerns have been most controversial among RPC members?

Did these controversial issues impede progress toward decisions on specific tasks? If so, which tasks?

If decisions were finally made, how were controversial issues resolved? What controversies were not resolved?

Public Input into the Plan

Do you feel that the views of the general public in your community have been well represented in the deliberations of the RPC?

What are the ways that you've received input from the public? (e.g., public information meetings, emails, phone calls, conversation, blogs, etc.)

To what extent have you felt pressure from the public input?

Have you felt compelled to vote for or against certain proposals to the plan because of public sentiment in your community?

Expected Outcomes of School District Reorganization

Why do you believe the state is requiring school districts to reorganize?

What do you believe will be the positive outcomes of school district reorganization?

What do you believe will be the negative outcomes of school district reorganization?

Appendix E

Data tables showing results of the RPC member survey, fall 2007

Demographics of Survey Respondents:

Table E1. Represented Group on RPC

	n	%
B	3	
M	8	
G	3	
H	4	9
T	0	

Table E2. Gender

	n	%
M	5	
F	6	
H	3	9
T	0	

Table E3. Age Group

	n	%
0	1	0
3	0	
4	8	
5	3	
6	2	
7	9	9
H	1	0
T	0	

Table E4. Do you have a child who currently attends school in the district you represent?

	n	%
Yes	6	
No	3	0
Other	0	

Table E5. Have you ever held a paid position in the school district you represent?

	n	%
Yes	0	0
No	3	0
Other	0	

Table E6. Have you ever volunteered in the school district you represent?

	n	%
Yes	3	
No	0	
Other	2	0
Other	0	

Aggregate Results--Responses to questions about potential outcomes of district reorganization:

Respondents were asked to indicate how likely they believe each outcome will become a reality within five years, using a 6 point scale (1 = highly unlikely, 6 = highly likely). For ease in displaying the data, the scale was collapsed from a six point scale to a three point scale in tables E7-E9. In reporting the results, we have grouped the responses under three categories: educational, financial, and other.

Table E7. Likelihood of Educational Outcomes

	Highly unlikely/Unlikely		Somewhat unlikely/Somewhat likely		Likely/Very likely	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Curriculum across schools in the RSU will be more similar	9	9.5%	26	27.4%	60	63.2%
Students will have more academic courses and programs from which to choose	18	18.4%	37	37.8%	43	43.9%
Students will have more extra and cocurricular activities from which to choose	26	26.8%	38	39.2%	33	34.0%
The quality of education for students in my community will have improved	32	32.7%	42	42.9%	24	24.5%
Courses and programs in schools across the state will be more similar	30	30.9%	49	50.5%	18	18.6%
All students in Maine will have equal access to educational programs that will support achievement of the Learning Results (Maine's learning standards)	37	38.1%	45	46.4%	15	15.5%
Teachers will have received state supported, uniform training in helping students achieve the Learning Results	38	40.0%	46	48.4%	11	11.6%

Table E8. Likelihood of Financial Outcomes

	Highly unlikely/Unlikely		Somewhat unlikely/Somewhat likely		Likely/Very likely	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
The cost of teacher salaries in the RUS will have increased	2	2.1%	7	7.2%	88	90.7%
Property taxes to support education in my community will have increased	1	1.0%	17	17.2%	81	81.8%
Collaborative purchasing agreements will increase	5	5.2%	22	22.7%	70	72.2%
Transportation costs will increase	6	6.2%	29	29.9%	62	63.9%
Education budgets will grow at predictable rates	33	33.7%	40	40.8%	25	25.5%
The cost of administering education in the region will have decreased	65	67.0%	20	20.6%	12	12.4%
Dollars spent for education in Maine will be used more efficiently	51	52.0%	36	36.7%	11	11.2%
Tax rates for education will be more uniform across Maine communities	66	68.0%	27	27.8%	4	4.1%

Table E9. Likelihood of Other Outcomes

	Highly unlikely/Unlikely		Somewhat unlikely/Somewhat likely		Likely/Very likely	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Community members will feel less connected to their schools than they do today	19	19.8%	17	17.7%	60	62.5%
The average time students will ride a school bus will increase	8	8.2%	37	38.1%	52	53.6%
School choice, for communities that currently have this option, will still exist	28	29.2%	29	30.2%	39	40.6%
Small schools in my community will be closed	34	34.7%	27	27.6%	37	37.8%
My community will have control of budget decision for the schools in my community	67	68.4%	19	19.4%	12	12.2%
Maintenance of facilities will have improved	41	42.3%	45	46.4%	11	11.3%
The state will fund a new school for our students	67	69.8%	20	20.8%	9	9.4%

Responses to questions on perceptions of the RPC process:

Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement, on a 6 point scale, with statements pertaining to the RPC process in which they are involved. For ease in displaying the data, the scale was collapsed from a six point scale to a three point scale. Table E10 displays these results.

Table E10. Perceptions of the RPC Process

	Strongly disagree/Disagree		Slightly disagree/Slightly agree		Agree/Strongly agree	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
The administrators from the school district I represent have provided information as requested by the RPC	4	4.0%	12	12.1%	83	83.8%
Everyone on the RPC has an opportunity to share opinions at RPC meetings	12	12.1%	6	6.1%	81	81.8%
One or more superintendents have played a leadership role in the RPC process	5	5.1%	14	14.3%	79	80.6%
The superintendent from my community is supportive of school district reorganization	12	12.8%	22	23.4%	60	63.8%
RPC subcommittees have worked effectively	19	19.4%	21	21.4%	58	59.2%
The facilitator has effectively guided the process	15	16.1%	24	25.8%	54	58.1%
All members of the RPC feel their voices are heard	13	13.7%	32	33.7%	50	52.6%
The RPC has made an adequate effort to keep the public informed	24	24.2%	36	36.4%	39	39.4%
The RPC has made an adequate effort to obtain the public input	33	33.3%	29	29.3%	37	37.4%
I am confident that the RPC will make the best decisions for our schools even if I disagree with them	29	29.6%	36	36.7%	33	33.7%
Teachers' concerns about reorganization have been adequately considered by the RPC	37	38.5%	35	36.5%	24	25.0%
School committee representatives dominate the discussion	56	57.1%	22	22.4%	20	20.4%
My RPC has the information needed to make decisions about school district reorganization	58	58.6%	24	24.2%	17	17.2%
Municipal representatives dominate the discussion	63	64.3%	24	24.5%	11	11.2%
General public representatives dominate the discussion	74	75.5%	20	20.4%	4	4.1%

Responses to questions about potential challenged in forming an RSU:

Respondents were given a list of potential challenges related to forming an RSU and asked to indicate how significant they perceive each challenge to be on a seven point scale (from not significant to highly significant). For ease in displaying the data, the scale was collapsed to a three point scale, by combining 1,2, and 3, keeping 4 by itself, and combining 5, 6, and 7. Table E11 displays the responses.

Table E11. Potential Challenges to Forming an RSU

	Not significant		Somewhat significant		Significant/Highly significant	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
The potential for increased tax rates for education	1	1.0%	6	6.1%	92	92.9%
Potential loss of local control	2	2.0%	5	5.1%	91	92.9%
Other	2	7.7%			24	92.3%
Concerns about cost sharing	7	7.0%	8	8.0%	85	85.0%
Concerns about existing contracts, their expiration, and/or renegotiation	10	10.1%	9	9.1%	80	80.8%
Different philosophies about education between and among communities	11	11.5%	9	9.4%	76	79.2%
Fear that small schools might be closed	11	11.2%	10	10.2%	77	78.6%
Representation on the RSU board	12	12.0%	10	10.0%	78	78.0%
Concern for increased bus time for students	12	12.1%	13	13.1%	74	74.7%
The disposition of property	20	20.0%	10	10.0%	70	70.0%
Obtaining adequate public input	17	17.3%	14	14.3%	67	68.4%
Concern about loss of school choice in some communities	23	23.5%	11	11.2%	64	65.3%
The authority granted to local advisory committees	26	26.5%	15	15.3%	57	58.2%
Concern that students' academic achievement will decline	28	28.6%	14	14.3%	56	57.1%
Concerns about the effects of large student enrollment	25	25.3%	19	19.2%	55	55.6%
The potential lack of administrators' familiarity with teacher and student issues	34	34.3%	17	17.2%	48	48.5%
Concern that academic rigor may decline	33	33.7%	20	20.4%	45	45.9%

Disaggregated Survey Results for Fall RPC Member Survey

Disaggregated survey results by RPC group

Tables E12-E14 show differences in mean scores for responses across the five sample RPC groups. Respondents indicated how likely they believe that each outcome would become a reality within five years of district consolidation, using a six point scale (1=highly unlikely, 6=highly likely). For many items, there are large differences in the mean response that appear to be significant, and reflect the particular concerns emphasized by the different RPCs in the interviews. On other items, the differences are smaller. There were a total of 100 returned surveys that identified the respondent's RPC group.

Table E12. Likelihood of Educational Outcomes: Mean Scores by RPC

	RPC A	RPC B	RPC C	RPC D	RPC E
All students in Maine will have equal access to educational programs that will support achievement of the Learning Results (Maine's learning standards)	2.77	3.00	2.17	3.76	2.53
<i>The quality of education for students in my community will have improved</i>	3.19	3.00	3.86	3.48	2.94
Curriculum across schools in the RSU will be more similar	4.08	4.00	5.14	4.59	5.03
Students will have more academic courses and programs from which to choose	4.24	3.70	4.14	4.64	3.59
Students will have more extra and cocurricular activities from which to choose	4.16	3.80	4.14	3.41	3.35
Teachers will have received state supported, uniform training in helping students achieve the Learning Results	2.96	3.00	2.57	2.67	3.06
Courses and programs in schools across the state will be more similar	3.08	3.20	2.71	3.64	3.55

N=100

Table E13. Likelihood of Financial Outcomes: Mean Scores by RPC

	RPC A	RPC B	RPC C	RPC D	RPC E
Tax rates for education will be more uniform across Maine communities	2.35	2.20	1.50	2.23	1.58
Property taxes to support education in my community will have increased	5.15	5.00	5.71	5.27	5.59
Transportation costs will increase	4.96	5.40	4.86	4.27	4.68
Collaborative purchasing agreements will increase	5.12	5.30	4.29	4.55	5.03
The cost of administering education in the region will have decreased	2.00	2.80	2.17	2.36	2.00
The cost of teacher salaries in the RUS will have increased	5.32	5.70	5.71	5.23	5.77
Dollars spent for education in Maine will be used more efficiently	2.80	2.20	2.14	3.09	2.41
Education budgets will grow at predictable rates	4.12	3.20	2.86	3.23	2.91

N=100

Table E14. Likelihood of Other Outcomes: Mean Scores by RPC

	RPC A	RPC B	RPC C	RPC D	RPC E
Small schools in my community will be closed	3.40	4.60	4.00	3.45	3.25
School choice, for communities that currently have this option, will still exist	3.68	3.33	2.00	4.73	3.55
My community will have control of budget decision for the schools in my community	2.44	2.00	2.29	2.50	1.97
Community members will feel less connected to their schools than they do today	4.36	4.30	4.86	4.30	4.47
The state will fund a new school for our students	1.76	1.60	3.20	2.86	1.72
The average time students will ride a school bus will have decreased	4.24	5.00	4.71	4.36	4.45
Maintenance of facilities will have improved	2.48	2.50	2.71	2.90	2.97

N=100

Disaggregated survey results by age of respondent

RPC members in the over 50 age group indicated more positive expectations for certain outcomes of district consolidation than did members in the 50 or under age group. These differences were statistically significant for several items related to educational, financial, and other outcomes ($p < .05$), as indicated by shading in the tables. Tables E15-E17 show differences in mean scores for responses between the two age groups. Respondents indicated how likely they believe that each outcome would become a reality within five years of district consolidation, using a six point scale (1=highly unlikely, 6=highly likely).

Table E15. Likelihood of Educational Outcomes: Mean Scores by Age Group

	50 or younger	Older than 50
All students in Maine will have equal access to educational programs that will support achievement of the Learning Results (Maine's learning standards)*	2.25	3.17
The quality of education for students in my community will have improved*	2.54	3.47
Curriculum across schools in the RSU will be more similar	4.69	4.53
Students will have more academic courses and programs from which to choose	3.66	4.22
Students will have more extra and cocurricular activities from which to choose*	3.14	3.91
Teachers will have received state supported, uniform training in helping students achieve the Learning Results	2.63	2.99
Courses and programs in schools across the state will be more similar	3.14	3.38

* Statistically significant difference ($p < .05$).

Table E16. Likelihood of Financial Outcomes: Mean Scores by Age Group

	50 or younger	Older than 50
Tax rates for education will be more uniform across Maine communities*	1.52	2.25
Property taxes to support education in my community will have increased	5.45	5.33
Transportation costs will increase	4.86	4.72
Collaborative purchasing agreements will increase*	4.55	5.07
The cost of administering education in the region will have decreased*	1.59	2.50
The cost of teacher salaries in the RUS will have increased	5.72	5.40
Dollars spent for education in Maine will be used more efficiently*	1.79	2.94
Education budgets will grow at predictable rates*	2.55	3.59

* Statistically significant difference ($p < .05$).

Table E17. Likelihood of Other Outcomes: Mean Scores by Age Group

	50 or younger	Older than 50
Small schools in my community will be closed	3.83	3.46
School choice, for communities that currently have this option, will still exist	3.41	3.85
My community will have control of budget decision for the schools in my community	2.28	2.25
Community members will feel less connected to their schools than they do today*	5.21	4.12
The state will fund a new school for our students	2.25	2.01
The average time students will ride a school bus will have decreased	4.55	4.41
Maintenance of facilities will have improved*	2.21	2.99

* Statistically significant difference ($p < .05$).

Disaggregated survey results by constituent group

RPC members representing municipal government indicated more positive expectations for certain outcomes of district consolidation than did members representing school districts or the general public. The differences were statistically significant for one item related to educational outcomes and one item related to social outcomes ($p < .05$), as indicated by shading in the tables. Tables E18-E20 show differences in mean scores for responses between the three constituent groups. Respondents indicated how likely they believe that each outcome would become a reality within five years of district consolidation, using a six point scale (1=highly unlikely, 6=highly likely).

Table E18. Likelihood of Educational Outcomes: Mean Scores by Group

	School committee	Municipal government	General public
All students in Maine will have equal access to educational programs that will support achievement of the Learning Results (Maine's learning standards)*	2.55	3.48	2.58
The quality of education for students in my community will have improved	2.71	3.19	3.46
Curriculum across schools in the RSU will be more similar	4.73	4.44	4.60
Students will have more academic courses and programs from which to choose	3.90	4.36	3.89
Students will have more extra and cocurricular activities from which to choose	3.32	3.89	3.75
Teachers will have received state supported, uniform training in helping students achieve the Learning Results	2.55	2.96	3.21
Courses and programs in schools across the state will be more similar	3.23	3.64	3.17

* Municipal government members had higher mean scores than school committee or general public members ($p < .05$).

Table E19. Likelihood of Financial Outcomes: Mean Scores by Group

	School committee	Municipal government	General public
Tax rates for education will be more uniform across Maine communities	1.94	2.29	1.74
Property taxes to support education in my community will have increased	5.58	5.18	5.38
Transportation costs will increase	4.65	4.71	4.89
Collaborative purchasing agreements will increase	5.10	4.61	5.11
The cost of administering education in the region will have decreased	1.74	2.39	2.40
The cost of teacher salaries in the RUS will have increased	5.37	5.54	5.69
Dollars spent for education in Maine will be used more efficiently	2.45	2.71	2.50
Education budgets will grow at predictable rates	3.13	3.43	3.33

Table E20. Likelihood of Other Outcomes: Mean Scores by Group

	School committee	Municipal government	General public
Small schools in my community will be closed	3.90	3.63	3.30
School choice, for communities that currently have this option, will still exist	3.93	3.63	3.47
My community will have control of budget decision for the schools in my community	2.42	1.96	2.31
Community members will feel less connected to their schools than they do today*	5.03	4.52	3.89
The state will fund a new school for our students	2.27	1.64	2.09
The average time students will ride a school bus will have decreased	4.58	4.30	4.53
Maintenance of facilities will have improved	2.61	2.54	3.03

* Statistically significant difference ($p < .05$).